

ENGINES OF GROWTH: USING THE CLASSIC SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES AS  
TOOLS FOR CONGREGATIONAL DEPTH AND MATURITY

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For my father, The Rev. Dr. Stephen R. Long,  
who would have loved reading this.

## CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
ABSTRACT	vii
CHAPTER 1. THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING	1
CHAPTER 2. BIBLICAL/THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK	15
CHAPTER 3. LITERATURE REVIEW	41
CHAPTER 4. PROJECT DESIGN	63
CHAPTER 5. OUTCOMES	93
Appendices	
A. SAMPLE REFLECTION JOURNAL	139
B. SERMONS	150
BIBLIOGRAPHY	212
VITA	217

## ILLUSTRATIONS

### Figures:

FIGURE ONE	93
FIGURE TWO	94
FIGURE THREE	94
FIGURE FOUR	95

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis-project focuses on a handful of the classic spiritual disciplines (prayer, the Scripture disciplines, fasting, solitude, silence, worship, thanksgiving), and how the proclamation and commendation of these disciplines through a six-week sermon series have helped to bring greater spiritual maturity and vitality to a congregation going through a time of malaise. I examine the role of the spiritual disciplines as they specifically relate to the doctrine of sanctification, and examine a variety of texts, historical and modern, which commend their practice to the Church. I finally describe the preaching project which I designed, and examine the data given back to me by my congregation via a Reflection Journal which I designed for that purpose.

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE PROBLEM IN ITS SETTING

### **Introduction:**

Whenever one reads the various literature or periodicals available to pastors and other church leaders today, or when one goes to conferences advertised for that demographic, one often hears about what is *new*. Authors are keen to promote their *new* ideas. Conference leaders and keynote speakers tell their listeners about their *new* curricula, or their *new* programs that are sure to revitalize your church, increase the bucks in your offering plates and the butts in your seats, and, quite possibly, regrow lost hair and increase muscle tone for flabby, aging pastors. This, of course, plays into the culture's obsession with the idea that all things new are, by definition, better than anything that is old. This concept is prevalent enough even to be parodied on popular television shows – witness how the character of Barney Stinson is both skewered and subtly admired for his personal motto “newer is always better” on an episode of *How I Met Your Mother*.<sup>1</sup> Now, new things are all well and good, of course; there are times when new voices and new ideas need to be heard. There are also, however, times when God's people need to reclaim *old* ideas and *old* practices. There are times when the time-honored traditions of Christ's Church must be brought back into the minds and hearts of his people. I believe that I am serving in one of those times.

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<sup>1</sup> *How I Met Your Mother*, season 6, episode 5, “Architect of Destruction,” directed by Pamela Fryman, written by Carter Bays and Craig Thomas, aired 18 October 2010 on CBS.



I cannot remember when I first encountered the idea of the classic spiritual disciplines. Growing up in the church as a “PK” (pastor’s kid), I of course was introduced to the disciplines of prayer, Scripture reading, and fasting, though I am not sure if I was given a mental category to classify those things, nor do I remember calling them “spiritual disciplines.” I do, however, remember reading John Ortberg’s *The Life You’ve Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* for a class in college, and that very well may be when the seeds for this project were first planted. Later, during my first year of seminary, I took a class called “Spiritual Disciplines for Church Leaders” that introduced me to other major spiritual discipline texts, including Richard Foster’s classic *Celebration of Discipline*. There, I learned about the various types of practices that can lead to a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord – things like prayer, fasting, solitude, silence, submission, guidance, and worship – and had an opportunity to practice some of them for the first time. The following year, I had an opportunity to teach a multi-week adult Sunday School class on these disciplines during my year-long field education internship; this class was well-received and provoked good discussion. More seeds had been planted in my mind, and some of them had reached the early stages of germination.

At that point, however, those seeds entered a period of dormancy. I, of course, continued to practice some of the basic disciplines of prayer and Scripture study in my personal life, but I did not continue to study the disciplines themselves *as disciplines*. That was not something I picked up again until I started reading for the first residency of this Doctor of Ministry program, a program originally titled “Pastoral Skills,” but now titled “Pastoral Theology in Practice.” That first year, the focus of the readings was on

the pastor as a person and a leader, and much of the reading centered on godly habits that foster an intentionality in the Christian life. Just like that, all my previous study of the disciplines came back to me; just like that, I found myself again enchanted with a very *old* set of practices that were suddenly new to me again. I found myself reading voraciously. I also found myself wanting to pass along this information in a useful, practical way to the people of my congregation.

### **The Setting:**

I serve the First Presbyterian Church of Harrison, OH – a Presbyterian Church (USA) congregation of just over one hundred seventy active members, with approximately fifty non-members who actively participate in the life of the congregation in some way. I have been the pastor here for just over five years. The church is situated in a suburb of Cincinnati but draws in worshipers from the greater Ohio-Indiana-Kentucky tri-state area. The town, which is home to nearly ten thousand people<sup>2</sup> (a total which nearly doubles when one includes the surrounding unincorporated areas)<sup>3</sup> maintains its own separate, small-town identity, as it was once an hour's drive from downtown Cincinnati, though now with convenient interstate access, that commute has been cut down to around twenty to twenty-five minutes on a good day. The congregation is over two hundred years old, having celebrated its bicentennial in 2011, and is proud of its heritage. We also honor many of the traditional Midwestern values that our founders would have honored, for better or for worse: humility, honesty, modesty, independence,

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<sup>2</sup> “American Fact Finder – Harrison city, Ohio,” United States Census Bureau, accessed September 7, 2017, [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml#](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml#).

<sup>3</sup> “American Fact Finder – 45030,” United States Census Bureau, accessed September 7, 2017, [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml#](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml#).

and, of course, success. Like most people in our tribe, we value results – getting things done, and more importantly, getting them done *right*. The congregation expects its pastor – me – to be the one who leads them into doing exactly that, so that we will be around for another two hundred years, at least!

### **The Problem:**

Lately, however, as with so many congregations in the United States, those results have been less than favorable. Gallup Polls report that while the downward trend in church affiliation and attendance has leveled off recently, still the most recent movement in those numbers was down.<sup>4</sup> Our congregation joined in that decline for much of the past ten years. Sadly, contributing greatly to this decline were a goodly number of our young families, many of whom dropped out of the life of the church without giving any reason why. Complicating matters greatly, the church faced a disastrous stewardship campaign in the fall of 2014, coming up seventy thousand dollars short of its initial budget of three hundred twenty thousand dollars; this forced a number of very painful cuts to the 2015 budget, including all mission, outreach, and Christian Education line items, along with ninety percent of the Worship and Music budget. Worst of all, a beloved staff member also had to be let go.

Part of this crisis can be attributed to a long and somewhat confusing denominational discernment process within our congregation, as well as some intentional work on my part and on the part of the elders to confront and heal some long-buried issues from the congregation's past. Both of these efforts led to anxiety among

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<sup>4</sup> Frank Newport, "Five Key Findings on Religion in the US," Gallup Daily, December 23, 2016, accessed August 3, 2017, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/200186/five-key-findings-religion.aspx>.

congregation members. All of that, however, paled in comparison to the major church fight which erupted at the same time, when a long-standing family of the church left over disagreements about the staffing of the church's nursery. The years following this event, which happened to coincide with my time in the Doctor of Ministry Program, were uneasy and anxious as the congregation struggled to pay its bills, and as we all struggled to overcome a disquieting malaise which fell upon the church. I heard many fearful comments about the future, including some who wondered how long we were going to be able to keep our doors open since we still had several years of mortgage payments left due to an addition to the building put on in the mid-2000s. In the midst of all this, I struggled with how to be effective as a pastor, and often found myself musing on how I had not been prepared for such things in seminary.

What was perhaps most difficult was the fact that even before these events, I had sensed some of this malaise in the congregation, even though, on the whole, I found that the congregation was hungry for the Word of God. This is perhaps seen in the astounding number of congregants who regularly come to the weekly Pastor's Bible Study each Monday evening; our average attendance for this hour-long study during the 2016-17 school year was twenty-five. For a church that averages between ninety and a hundred people for our Sunday worship services, that is an incredible percentage of folks to have engaged in a Bible Study. Attendance is similar, though slightly lower, for the summer book studies I teach each year, in which folks in the congregation spend a month reading a Christian book of some kind, and then come together for an evening teaching and discussion time.

Nevertheless, as important as the Word and faith seem to be to the congregation, even before the deep troubles of 2014, I still found myself wrestling with how sporadically that Word seemed to be taking root in the congregants' personal lives. I still saw people holding grudges and refusing to forgive. I still saw the terrible effects of sharp tongues and gossip. I still saw very little evangelism and outreach to unchurched people in Harrison, and far too much grumbling and complaining about things that boiled down to matters of comfort and convenience, such as the length of the worship service or the temperature in the sanctuary. I all too often found myself wondering why the Word which people clearly hungered for each week was not getting down deep enough to change lives significantly – and moreover, what I could do about that.

Nevertheless, I knew that the folks of First Presbyterian were not especially unspiritual. On the contrary, they were good folks who loved Jesus. Still, there was a disconnect within the congregation – our faith was not producing fruit in the way that it should. The Barna Group has documented this disconnection phenomenon – of how pastors think that their congregations have a much deeper commitment to the Lord than they really do. One study related how “pastors contend that 70% of the adults in their church consider their personal faith in God to transcend all other priorities . . . (while) amazingly, as many as one out of every six pastors (16%) contends that 90% or more of the adults in their church hold their relationship with God as their top life priority!”<sup>5</sup> In contrast, however, the article continues that “adults are lukewarm about God,” citing that “Only one out of every seven adults (15%) placed their faith in God at the top of their

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<sup>5</sup> Research Releases in Leaders and Pastors, “Surveys Show Pastors Claim Congregants Are Deeply Committed to God But Congregants Deny It!” Barna, January 10, 2006, accessed September 7, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/surveys-show-pastors-claim-congregants-are-deeply-committed-to-god-but-congregants-deny-it/>.

priority list,” with Protestants doing slightly better in that category at 23%.<sup>6</sup> Even evangelicals flunked this question, with just over half (51%) saying that their faith in God was most important to them.<sup>7</sup> In another study from the Barna Group, the researchers found that:

less than one out of every five self-identified Christians (18%) claims to be totally committed to investing in their own spiritual development. About the same proportion of self-identified Christians (22%) claims to be “completely dependent upon God.” Those figures help explain why a majority of self-identified Christian adults (52%) believe that there is much more to the Christian life than what they have experienced. Without a full determination to live like Christ and for Him, the path to complete transformation is blocked.<sup>8</sup>

It was clear that my congregation suffered from some of these problems. They loved Jesus, loved worship, loved their church – but the investment in their spiritual lives and the determination to live like Christ and for him was lacking for some reason – and in our time of crisis, it showed, manifesting in the disquieting anxious malaise that hung over the people.

As I reflected on this, I found that there were two forces at play here. On the one hand, there were those whose driving force in their spiritual life was not really a profound, saving relationship with Jesus Christ, but rather typical Western consumerism – they attended church because, in their minds, being part of a church would lead to greater happiness and satisfaction.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, there were some in the congregation who knew and loved Jesus, but simply had never been taught how to go

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<sup>6</sup> Research Releases, “Surveys Show . . .”.

<sup>7</sup> Research Releases. “Surveys Show . . .”.

<sup>8</sup> Research Releases in Leaders and Pastors, “Self-Described Christians Dominate America but Wrestle with Four Aspects of Spiritual Depth,” Barna, September 13, 2011, accessed September 7, 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/self-described-christians-dominate-america-but-wrestle-with-four-aspects-of-spiritual-depth>.

<sup>9</sup> “Is Consumerism Killing the Church?” Relevant, December 6, 2006, accessed August 3, 2017 at <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/church/blog/1191-is-consumerism-killing-the-church>.

deeper in their faith. I kept running into people who knew they should pray, but had never really been taught how. They knew they should read the Bible, but resisted doing so because they did not understand what they read. Both of these groups had one thing in common: a lack of discipline in their faith, a lack of intentionality in their relationship with Jesus Christ. Both of these groups lacked a passion for the Lord, and in some cases, even lacked any conscious recognition of a need for that passion. Occasionally, the scales would fall from a parishioner's eyes, and she would struggle to put this shortcoming into words – how she longed for the “something more” immortalized by the late Catherine Marshall, and how she simply did not know how to get there.<sup>10</sup> But many, like in the Barna Group's research, believed there was more, but did not have the drive to seek out that missing piece of the faith.

### **The Project:**

With all this in mind, I began to wonder: what would help this congregation reclaim its vitality and verve? Did my parishioners need something new and flashy – a quick-fix, pre-packaged, junk food program? Or did they need, perhaps, something old instead – a more time-honored, rigorous, and therefore more difficult and less sexy initiative? It became clear to me during my first Doctor of Ministry residency, as I found myself interested – nay, enchanted – with the very old spiritual disciplines of the Church that I needed to help the congregation reclaim these practices, as well. After all, *disciples*

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<sup>10</sup> Catherine Marshall, *Something More: In Search of a Deeper Faith* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974), xv.

are people who are *disciplined* – that is, who follow a *discipline* laid out by their master, Jesus Christ.<sup>11</sup>

I therefore designed my first post-residency project to be an eight-week class on those disciplines during the summer of 2015. In all, twenty-seven different people participated in these classes; on average, we had nineteen people each week. After an introductory class which expounded upon the *need* for the disciplines, and how they help us grow intentionally in our faith, we then spent the following seven weeks learning about the Biblical warrant for most of the twelve classic spiritual disciplines described in Richard Foster’s classic work, *Celebration of Discipline*.<sup>12</sup> We also spent a portion of most weeks talking about some more practical how-to methods for each of those disciplines. On the whole, the reception for this project, as evidenced by the surveys I asked participants to fill out each week, were positive. Nearly all of the participants said that they felt that they had learned a good deal through the classes, and most indicated that they were interested in either trying a new discipline, or in going deeper into a discipline they already practiced. One parishioner even wrote that “It felt like we were not done when class ended. Maybe homework would help at times to be able to cover more in 1 hour.”<sup>13</sup> I was greatly encouraged by comments like these, as the only explanation for a parishioner asking for homework after a Christian Education class is that God has worked some kind of amazing miracle in our midst!

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<sup>11</sup> While the linguistic link between *discipline* and *disciple* should have been obvious to me, I did not see it until I reread John Ortberg’s fantastic book, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997). See page 54.

<sup>12</sup> Foster’s list: Meditation, Prayer, Fasting, Study, Simplicity, Solitude, Submission, Service, Confession, Worship, Guidance, Celebration. See Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). For more on this, see page 47.

<sup>13</sup> Unpublished Survey from the author’s private collection, Survey #8 from my first post-residency project, written summer of 2015.



That being said, I was hardly naïve enough to believe that one eight-week summer class would solve the problem of spiritual malaise within the congregation, nor did I go into the endeavor expecting a mini-Great Awakening in Southwest Ohio. Pastoring is, after all, a long-term profession, and spiritual growth is often slow.<sup>14</sup> At best, I hoped for seeds to be planted, and perhaps for a few people to be moved in modest ways toward greater intentionality and discipline in their spiritual lives. My hopes were more than rewarded, therefore; God had shown up, and I was profoundly grateful.

Nevertheless, I knew that more work needed to be done, and I thought perhaps that I might continue work with the disciplines in my second post-residency project. As this was the year that focused on pastoral care and counseling in the Pastoral Skills program, however, I instead preached a seven-week sermon series on what Scripture has to say about a variety of common emotional and spiritual disorders – things such as anxiety, depression, grief, and anger.<sup>15</sup> While not focusing on the disciplines explicitly, nevertheless my work with the disciplines did inform this series, particularly in the area of “taking one’s thoughts captive” (2 Corinthians 10:5), and “thinking on these things” (Philippians 4:8). In my nearly fourteen years as a pastor, I have never had such an overwhelmingly positive response to a sermon series as I had with this series. If nothing else, it showed me the power of a well-crafted sermon series which speaks to a felt need of a congregation. With the success of this second post-residency project, I knew that my final thesis-project had to be another which focused on preaching, if for no other reason than I wanted to repeat this level of response.

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<sup>14</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 16.

<sup>15</sup> This sermon series, entitled “There Is Hope,” was preached from May 15 – July 3, 2016 at the First Presbyterian Church of Harrison, OH.

I therefore decided to do something old for this project: I chose to do a six-week sermon series on the classical spiritual disciplines, building on the work I had already done with this congregation in this respect. I believed that by proclaiming and commending these ancient practices to the people in the pews, I would give them tools to live more intentionally in their faith, and that this would help our congregation continue to emerge from our spiritual malaise. Naturally, a six-week series is not long enough to cover *all* the spiritual disciplines – not even all the spiritual disciplines in Richard Foster’s classic list which I had used as a basis for my summer class in 2015. Perhaps a longer series would have been in order in some contexts; nevertheless, I had learned during my second post-residency project that this was a good length both for me and for the congregation when it came to “heavy” matters like this. I sensed that a longer series would produce diminishing returns – both in myself as a preacher, and in the congregation as hearers. One sometimes has to discern that subjective aspect of knowing what is “do-able,” and avoid biting off more than one can chew.

To this end, I therefore had to leave out several of the classic spiritual disciplines, such as the disciplines of guidance and confession; I instead chose to focus on practices that a.) I believed would best benefit the folks in the pews, and b.) the Lord Jesus himself either practiced or commended in His teachings. In the end, therefore, the series, which was delivered in September and October of 2017, began with an introductory sermon which laid the groundwork for the project, answering such questions as what the spiritual disciplines are, why they are necessary, and how they help us reach the goal of spiritual growth and greater intentionality in the Christian life. The next two sermons then focused on what I call the “Big Two” – the two types of disciplines that are absolutely

necessary in the Christian life, namely the disciplines of prayer and Scripture study/meditation. I then moved on to a sermon on fasting, the forgotten, ugly step-child of the spiritual disciplines family, and yet, historically, one of the most important practices for God's people. Sermon number five focused on silence and solitude, which I believe are so very necessary in our hectic, loud, and frantic world today. I then finished with a sermon on worship and thanksgiving, which I believed would tie everything up nicely.<sup>16</sup>

In the midst of this, I asked the congregation to participate by giving me feedback. I had initially intended to conduct a focus group at the beginning and end of the project as a way to gauge whether or not the sermon series had had any sort of impact on the spiritual lives and practices of the congregation. Had those focus groups not given the information I needed, I had planned to conduct one-on-one interviews. When I did the research methodology consultation paper required by this program, however, the professor in charge of that portion of the degree program, Gordon College's Dr. Bryan Auday, instead recommended that I conduct a focus group or two at the beginning, and follow up with semi-structured one-on-one interviews at the end, as this would have given an opportunity for congregants to give answers both in a semi-public and in a private setting. When I incorporated these ideas into my initial thesis project proposal, however, my advisor, Dr. David A. Currie made an alternative suggestion. He counseled that these methods would be much more difficult and time-consuming, and that they might not garner the information I needed anyway. Instead, he recommended putting together a reflection journal – i.e., a series of questions to be filled out before and after

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<sup>16</sup> For more detail on the content and structure of this sermon series, see Chapter Four.

the project, and after each sermon in the project. Such an approach would give more than small “snapshots” of information, and instead would provide an opportunity for a period of continuous feedback from the congregation. I therefore designed such a document and passed copies out to the congregation during the first week of the endeavor. These journals naturally included a cover letter explaining the document, as well as giving the appropriate assurances of confidentiality necessary for research purposes. After preaching the series, I gathered up all the journals, and studied and compiled the results to see if it had helped spur the congregation toward greater growth and intentionality in the faith, which was my goal.

The remaining chapters of this thesis project will explore both the foundations and the details of this endeavor in greater depth. In chapter two, I examine the Biblical and theological framework of this enterprise. I also examine pertinent Scripture passages that talk about how we discipline ourselves in the faith as we train for righteousness, as well as looking more profoundly at the theology of both sanctification and preaching. In chapter three, I examine some of the relevant literature on the spiritual disciplines, and what they have to say to us along these lines. Chapter four looks more closely at the design of this thesis-project, and why I chose to structure it the way I did. The final chapter looks at the results of the project, including an analysis of the congregational reflection journals I distributed.

“Everything old is new again” – or so said my great-grandmother with great regularity. She may have been thinking of The Teacher’s wisdom in Ecclesiastes, which famously tells us that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9c, ESV). Old things do indeed become new again – and that is what I hope to accomplish with this

thesis-project: to re-introduce some old practices in such a way that they become fresh, new practices among the people of my congregation. I hope these old, time-honored disciplines, commended and proclaimed in a winsome way, will take root and become engines for growth in the lives of my people, who seem to be slogging and stumbling through the Christian life rather than running along the narrow road in a disciplined, intentional way. With God's help, his people's lives will be blessed, and their practice of the faith will flourish.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

#### **Introduction: Sanctification:**

Any discussion of the spiritual disciplines is really, theologically speaking, a discussion that belongs under the heading of sanctification. Sanctification is one of the three pieces of the process of salvation – the other two being justification and glorification. A helpful rule of thumb for understanding these three “-ations” is to think of the past, the present, and the future. Justification is a past action accomplished on our behalf by our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. Because the believer has been justified – that is, because Christ’s work has accomplished a legal verdict of “Not Guilty” for our sins – that believer can therefore say with assurance that he or she has been saved. Sanctification, however, is an ongoing process throughout a lifetime. The Holy Spirit works in and with His Church to make believers holy people – that is, to make the heart, soul, mind, will, and all other parts match this legal verdict of “Not Guilty.” The Spirit works, and the believer, to some extent, cooperates in the process of becoming actually Not Guilty. In this sense, believers can say that they are being saved. The culmination of this process is glorification, in which the Lord God will bring this all to completion in the new heavens and new earth. God’s people will be “changed from glory into glory,” as Charles Wesley writes.<sup>1</sup> Believers will finally be the people God always intended for them to be – and in this sense, they can say that they will be saved. The confusion of

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Wesley, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.” Found in *Hymns for the Family of God*, Fred Bock, gen. ed. (Nashville: Paragon Associates, Inc., 1976). This particular turn of phrase is based on 2 Corinthians 3:18.

these different aspects of salvation, or the collapsing of one aspect down into another, has led to all sorts of troubles in both faith and practice throughout the history of the Church.

Martin Luther teaches about this three-fold salvation work of God in our lives in his *Small Catechism* during his explanation of the third article of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church he daily and abundantly forgives all my sins, and the sins of all believers, and on the last day he will raise me and all the dead and will grant eternal life to me and to all who believe in Christ. This is most certainly true.<sup>2</sup>

Here we see Luther, while primarily talking about sanctification, nevertheless laying out all three steps of salvation. The believer, he writes, cannot come to believe in Jesus on his or her own; nevertheless, Jesus has come into the world, and through the Gospel (implying justification through the cross), calls the Church unto himself. The Spirit, then, both *has sanctified* the believer, and *continues to sanctify* the believer as part of the whole Church – Luther uses both tenses of this verb to capture the paradoxical tenses of salvation. Moreover, he writes, on the last day God's people shall be glorified – raised from the dead and granted eternal life.

In true Lutheran fashion, God alone is named as the author and actor in this three-fold process of salvation. Nevertheless, one should remember that the reformer wrote this as a catechism – that is, as an aid in this process of sanctification. In it, he commends the teaching of the primary components of a classic catechism: the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. He also includes sections

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, 2.6. In *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 480.

on the two sacraments, on confession, on morning and evening prayer, and on praying grace at the table, as well as general instructions for believers in all walks of life. All of these teachings imply an understanding of the duty of a Christian to participate in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit – or, to “keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25, ESV). While Luther was keen to elevate the work of God in the process of salvation, he nowhere writes that the believer is to be utterly passive in this process. Instead – and again, in true Lutheran fashion – he writes that those who neither know these basics of the faith, nor put them into practice, live “as if they were pigs and irrational beasts.”<sup>3</sup> One cannot help but wonder what today’s congregations would make of such statements.

Several confessions from my own denominational tradition, the Presbyterian Church (USA), also speak to this ongoing interplay between the work of God and the work of the believer in the process of sanctification. In perhaps one of the most beloved questions and answers from the Heidelberg Catechism, authors Zacharias Ursinus and Kaspar Olevianus write:

**Q. 86. Since we are redeemed from our sin and its wretched consequences by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why must we do good works?**

A. 86. Because just as Christ has redeemed us with his blood he also renews us through his Holy Spirit according to his own image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves grateful to God for his goodness and that he may be glorified through us; and further, so that we ourselves may be assured of our own faith by its fruits and by our reverent behavior may win our neighbors to Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Here, Ursinus and Olevianus, while maintaining that salvation is the work of God from first to last, nevertheless maintain the necessity of doing good works, or participating in

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<sup>3</sup> Luther, *Small Catechism*, 0.3.

<sup>4</sup> Zacharias Ursinus and Kaspar Olevianus, “The Heidelberg Catechism,” Q&A 86. In *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, part 1, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 1996), 4.086.



this work God is doing, “so that with our whole life we may show ourselves grateful to God.” Similarly, Dr. Anthony Tuckney and the other Westminster Divines say the same when they write:

**Q.77. Wherein do justification and sanctification differ?**

A.77. Although sanctification be inseparably joined with justification, yet they differ in that God, in justification, imputeth the righteousness of Christ; in sanctification, his Spirit infuseth grace, and enableth to the exercise thereof; in the former, sin is pardoned; in the other, it is subdued; the one doeth equally free all believers from the revenging wrath of God, and that perfectly in this life, that they never fall into condemnation; the other is neither equal in all, nor in this life perfect in any, but growing up to perfection.<sup>5</sup>

It is telling how the Larger Catechism distinguishes between the first and second phase of salvation. While justification is entirely the work of God, and is applied equally to all, sanctification becomes somewhat messier in that, while God is the one who infuses his grace into us, thereby applying the death and resurrection of the Son to his people, nevertheless this grace must be “exercised.” Hence, the work of sanctification is not uniform, nor uniformly seen in all, but rather is a process of growth into perfection – and therefore individual in its character. We each exercise God’s grace in our lives differently, depending on a multitude of factors.

John Calvin also teaches this ongoing interplay of work between God and the believer in his *Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, itself a distillation of the reformer’s masterful teaching on sanctification from his magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.<sup>6</sup> Consider the following:

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony Tuckney, et. al., “The Westminster Larger Catechism,” Q&A 77. In *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, part 1, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 1996), 7.187.

<sup>6</sup> Translator Henry J. Van Andel refers to the *Golden Booklet* as a work to rank among the classics, such as Augustine’s *Confessions*, Thomas a Kempis’s *Imitation of Christ*, and Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* – only, he writes, “it is shorter, saner, sounder, more vigorous and to the point,” a comment which made this writer laugh out loud. See Henry J. Van Andel, Preface to *The Golden Booklet of the Christian Life*, by John Calvin, trans. Henry J. Van Andel (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1952), 10.

2. The Lord has adopted us to be his children on this condition that we reveal an imitation of Christ who is the mediator of our adoption. Unless we ardently and prayerfully devote ourselves to Christ's righteousness we do not only faithlessly revolt from our Creator, but we also abjure him as our Savior.

3. Scripture accompanies its exhortations with the promise of God's countless blessings and of the all-embracing salvation he grants us. Therefore, since God has revealed himself as a Father, we would be guilty of the basest ingratitude if we did not behave as his children. Since Christ has purified us through the baptism in his blood, we should not become defiled by fresh pollution. Since Christ has united us to his body as his members, we should be anxious not to disgrace him by any blemish. Since Christ, our Head, has ascended to heaven, we should leave our carnal desires behind and lift our hearts upward to him. Since the Holy Spirit has dedicated us as temples of God, we should exert ourselves not to profane his sanctuary, but to display his glory. Since both our soul and body are destined to inherit an incorruptible and never-fading crown, we should keep them pure and undefiled till the day of our Lord. Such are the best foundations for a proper code of conduct. Philosophers never rise above the natural dignity of man. (But Scripture points us to our only sinless Savior, Jesus Christ. Rom. 6:44ff; 8:29)<sup>7</sup>

Again, this pattern emerges: God has done *this* (namely, the work of justification), therefore, his people, in response, should increasingly desire and hopefully more and more do *that* (participate in his sanctifying work in our lives). God has adopted the elect as his children, so therefore the Church is called to live according to that reality. God has given His people the righteousness of His Son, Jesus, as a gift, and so therefore they must ardently and prayerfully devote themselves to this righteousness. With his typical pastoral concern for his readers, Calvin is sure to stress both the positive and negative aspects of this sanctification process – that this ardent devotion to the righteousness of Jesus Christ involves both a putting off of corrupting influences, and the putting on of purifying goodness. Elsewhere, he refers to this as the “mortification of the flesh and the

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life.*, trans. Henry J. Van Andel (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1952), 1.3.2-3

vivification of the spirit,”<sup>8</sup> a distinction which will be echoed in the next chapter in author Dallas Willard’s distinction between two categories of the spiritual disciplines: the disciplines of abstinence and the disciplines of engagement.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Role of the Spiritual Disciplines in Sanctification: The Means of Grace**

With this understanding of the ongoing, even somewhat messy, process of sanctification, it is now possible to consider the role of the spiritual disciplines in that process. Historically, many in the Church have located these disciplines among what are called the “means of grace” – that is, the means by which God’s grace is applied personally to his people’s lives. Calvin puts it like this:

As explained in the previous book, it is by the faith in the gospel that Christ becomes ours and we are made partakers of the salvation and eternal blessedness brought by him. Since, however, in our ignorance and sloth (to which I add fickleness of disposition) we need outward helps to beget and increase faith within us, and advance it to its goal, God has also added these aids that he may provide for our weakness.<sup>10</sup>

This is an important truth: God himself has ordained these means of grace for us. In the ongoing process of sanctification, God has provided certain tools for his people. Calvin goes on to spell out these means or tools in the fourth book of his masterpiece *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, noting that “first of all, (God) instituted sacraments, which we who have experienced them feel to be highly useful aids to foster and strengthen faith,” for “shut up as we are in the prison house of our flesh, we have not yet attained angelic

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<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, “Institutes of the Christian Religion”, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. XX, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), III. iii. 8.

<sup>9</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperOne, 1988), 158.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, i, 1.

rank, God, therefore, in his wonderful providence accommodating himself to our capacity, has prescribed a way for us, though still far off, to draw near to him.”<sup>11</sup>

As the celebration of the sacraments was a hot-button issue in Calvin’s day (to say the least), and since this issue was tied up in the issue of the proper form and authority structure of the Church itself, Calvin then spends the bulk of Book Four discussing ecclesiology before getting to his sacramentology. Ultimately, Calvin states that “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”<sup>12</sup> These two ordinances of God, the Word and the sacraments, he teaches are the definitive means of grace; they “offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace.”<sup>13</sup>

It is instructive that the two Protestant sacraments each include an element of receiving and responding.<sup>14</sup> Baptism, to quote Calvin, “is the sign of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God’s children.”<sup>15</sup> In receiving this sign, the believer receives all that the sign signifies. At the same time, however, baptism implies a response; Jesus, in his Great Commission, commanded his disciples to baptize new disciples, and to “teach . . . them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20, ESV). Those who receive God’s grace through baptism are called to respond to that grace by obeying him; even infants who are baptized, who have received God’s grace in their lives

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<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, i, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, i, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, xiv, 17

<sup>14</sup> David A. Currie, e-mail message to author, September 27, 2017. I am grateful to Dr. Currie for pointing this connection out to me.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, xv, 1.

long before they could recognize it, are still called, as they grow, to respond to this grace through obedience. The same pattern is found in the Lord's Supper, for as believers who have been united with Christ in baptism, the Church is called to continue to feed upon his grace by eating the bread and drinking the cup in faith. Through these means, God's people both receive and respond – and through this, they become more like him.

### **The Spiritual Disciplines: Engines of Growth**

In this process of sanctification, therefore, it is clear that God ordains certain means to apply and communicate his grace. Most Christian theologians would agree that the Word and the sacraments are included among these means; the question, however, is what other practices would rank among them. For indeed, throughout the history of the Church, many have recommended the classic spiritual disciplines as means of grace, or “engines for growth” – that is, that they also are God-given tools for us to exercise as we “keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25), as we participate in this work of sanctification that God is doing in and with us. Before we dig in to that contention, it is appropriate that we should pause first to define what a spiritual discipline actually is.

In my work with these practices of spiritual formation, I have found John Ortberg's definition to be most helpful: the disciplines are “any activity I do by direct effort that will help me do what I cannot now do by direct effort,” or, to put it more plainly, “any activity that can help me gain power to live life as Jesus taught and modeled it.”<sup>16</sup> Author Donald Whitney defines them as “habits of devotion and experiential

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<sup>16</sup> John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 51, 52.

Christianity that have been practiced by the people of God since biblical times.”<sup>17</sup> Dallas Willard, in his work *The Spirit of the Disciplines* puts it this way:

... We can become like Christ by doing one thing – by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself. If we have faith in Christ, we must believe that he knew how to live. We can, through faith and grace, become like Christ by practicing the types of activities he engaged in, by arranging our whole lives around the activities he himself practiced in order to remain constantly at home in the fellowship of his Father.<sup>18</sup>

Those activities, Willard goes on to say, are today called the spiritual disciplines, and when practiced faithfully and intentionally, are used by God to lead his people to that goal of becoming like Jesus Christ himself.

In short, by exercising the disciplines Jesus practiced in his own life, believers engage in the sanctifying work the Lord is already doing, and therefore become more Christ-like. To quote Nathan Foster:

The concept of spiritual disciplines is really quite simple: we do the practices that Jesus did. Over time these practices become habitual, thus enabling us to respond to life in a way more like Jesus would if he were to live our life. As we submit our will to spiritual practices, God’s grace brings forth character transformation. This seems to be the dominant means God uses to bring about change in our lives. Christian spiritual formation is the process of becoming people formed into the likeness of Christ’s character.<sup>19</sup>

For this reason, while Ortberg above may write that any practice, if done in the right way and for the right reasons, may become a spiritual discipline, nevertheless, the Church has classically commended certain disciplines – especially certain practices which Jesus himself practiced – to her members. In modern times, Richard Foster has perhaps done

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<sup>17</sup> Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), 17.

<sup>18</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperOne, 1998), ix.

<sup>19</sup> Nathan Foster, *The Making of an Ordinary Saint: My Journey From Frustration to Joy with the Spiritual Disciplines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 16. In this fascinating work, Foster – the son of spiritual disciplines giant Richard Foster – lays to rest many of the demons of his past by intentionally practicing the twelve spiritual disciplines laid out in his father’s magnum opus, *Celebration of Discipline*, over a twelve-month period. The results are fascinating. For more on this, see page 49.

more than any other author to commend these practices to our era. In his classic work *Celebration of Discipline*, he explores the following twelve disciplines: meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration.<sup>20</sup> With the exception of confession, perhaps, Jesus practiced or taught all of these disciplines. It stands to reason, therefore, that if believers wish to become more like Jesus – which is, of course, the aim of the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying work – then they would do well to practice these same disciplines ourselves.<sup>21</sup>

The Apostle Paul borrows from the field of athletics as an illustration of this principle in two different passages that are crucial to our understanding of the purpose of these spiritual disciplines. In the first, he writes:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:24-27, ESV)

Here, Paul is saying that just as a master athlete must be disciplined in his training if he is to have any hope of winning a prize, so must the believer be disciplined in his or her spiritual training if they wish to receive an even greater prize: the crown of life. This metaphor would have been especially apt for the Corinthian believers, as Corinth was the site of the biennial Isthmian Games, which at the time were second only to the ancient

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), v.

<sup>21</sup> At this point, a keen-eyed reader may ask, “But what about other disciplines – like journaling or meeting with an accountability partner? We have no record of Jesus practicing these habits.” The reader would, of course, be right in this assertion. The answer to this is twofold: on the one hand, it is true that these disciplines must be considered as second-order disciplines. While they are helpful in the Christian life, they cannot be as helpful as the habits Jesus himself practiced. At the same time, these kinds of disciplines are also, however, connected to other first-order disciplines. Journaling can be, in a way, a kind of prayer, while having an accountability partner can be a kind of confession and repentance – a practice commanded by Jesus.

Olympic games in prestige.<sup>22</sup> Athletes competed for a *stephanos*, a crown of laurel or celery leaves – a fact that was again demonstrated in 2004 when modern Olympic athletes received similar crowns for placing in their various events, though somewhat more permanent medals of gold, silver, and bronze were also awarded. Christians, however, are running for something more permanent even than gold or bronze: they are running for godliness, for Christ-likeness, and ultimately for eternal life and fellowship with God. That is a prize very much worth intentional discipline!

Paul uses this same metaphor again later in his letter to his protégé, Timothy:

Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. (1 Timothy 4:7-10, ESV)

In this passage, Paul again talks of training, only this time he stresses the toil involved in such training. Discipline is not always fun, and it certainly is not easy. Any athlete will tell you that there are many days when he or she does not feel like training. Training often involves a great deal of pain and sore muscles. Saying “yes” to one’s training means saying “no” to a host of other more pleasant and more fun activities.

Nevertheless, the athlete finds all this pain and sacrifice worthwhile for the sake of the prize. In the same way, the Christian should find the exercise of the spiritual disciplines – i.e., training in godliness – to be worthwhile for the sake of our prize: sanctification.

We must be willing to undergo the strictures of spiritual discipline in order to gain greater

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<sup>22</sup> W. Harold Mare, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 10, *Romans-Galatians*, gen. ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: ZondervanPublishingHouse, 1976), 246.



maturity, greater holiness, and greater fellowship with God. He alone makes the process worthwhile!

Understanding this truth – the importance of keeping one’s eyes on the goal and purpose of the disciplines – clarifies something crucial about their practice: the disciplines are not ends unto themselves. As Dallas Willard writes:

Yet when we look closely and continually at Jesus, we do not lose sight of this one fundamental, crucial point – the activities constituting the disciplines *have no value in themselves*. The aim and substance of spiritual life is not fasting, prayer, hymn singing, frugal living, and so forth. Rather it is the effective and full enjoyment of active love of God and humankind in all the daily rounds of normal existence where we are placed. The spiritually advanced person is not the one who engages in lots and lots of disciplines, any more than the good child is the one who received lots and lots of instruction or punishment.<sup>23</sup>

Again, practices in the field of athletics can be instructive here: when my sister played basketball, her coach would make the team run a “suicide” drill – i.e., a drill in which the team would run from the edge of the court up to the first line and then back, and then up to the second line and then back, etc. The goal of this exercise was not how many “suicides” one could run, or even how fast one could run them. The goal of the exercise was for my sister to train her body for endurance, so that she could play the game of basketball well. The “suicide” drill was simply a means to that end. Similarly, in the field of music, when I took piano lessons, I had “finger power” practices I had to do each week. Musically speaking, these exercises were not really songs; in fact, sometimes they were simply repetitive patters of notes, or even a nonsensical collection of notes. One did not play these exercises simply for themselves; they never were going to be performed at a concert. That was not their purpose – they were designed to strengthen my fingers and hands so that eventually I would be able to play songs that *would* be performed at a

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<sup>23</sup> Willard, 138.

concert – and hopefully, to play them with precision and with adequate finger strength. If I had learned to play those exercises perfectly – which I certainly did not, by any means – I would not have been considered a good piano player; the exercises were simply means toward that end. So it is with the spiritual disciplines – they are means toward the end of godliness and spiritual maturity.

In the same way, it is clear that one's attitude toward the spiritual disciplines is crucial. If one is performing the disciplines simply because one thinks that is what a Christian is supposed to do, then the disciplines are going to be ineffective. Similarly, if one is performing the disciplines as a means to impress other people, or worse, as a means to try to impress God, or to manipulate him into bestowing holy goodies and blessings, then they are going to be futile. What matters is not how many Bible verses a person reads at any given time, or how many minutes are spent in prayer, or how long a person fasts, but instead whether these practices are helping a person grow in faith and become more like Jesus. The *why* of the spiritual disciplines, in other words, is just as important as the *what*. As Richard Foster writes, "To know the mechanics does not mean that we are practicing the Disciplines. The Spiritual Disciplines are an inward and spiritual reality,<sup>24</sup> and the inner attitude of the heart is far more crucial than the mechanics for coming into the reality of the spiritual life."<sup>25</sup> Author David Mathis agrees:

The note we will strike again and again, without any apology, is that the means of grace, fleshed out in our various habits of grace (i.e., the spiritual disciplines), to be for us *means of joy* in God, and thus means of his glory. And so the simplicity, stability, confidence, power, and joy of God himself stand behind these means.

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<sup>24</sup> One of the peculiarities I found as I read a variety of authors on this subject involves capitalization. Some, such as Foster, capitalize "Spiritual Disciplines", while others do not. I have chosen to write "spiritual disciplines" or "disciplines" in lower-case letters unless quoting an author who does otherwise.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Foster, 3.

These are the paths of his promise. He stands ready to pour out his wonderfully wild and lavish grace through these channels.<sup>26</sup>

Therein lies the key: theologically speaking, when one practices these disciplines as a *means of joy in God*, and as a *means of his glory*, then God stands ready to pour out his grace and blessings through them. Donald Whitney writes, “The Spiritual Disciplines . . . hoist the sails of the soul in hopes of experiencing the gracious wind of God’s Spirit.”<sup>27</sup> We therefore again see the wonderful paradox of the spiritual disciplines: that while God is the primary actor in the work of sanctification, he nevertheless chooses to use our participation in these practices toward his purposes. One can therefore think of the disciplines being, at the same time, both God’s work and ours. One must always insist upon remembering that the primary work of sanctification is *God’s* work; nevertheless, the believer responds to this work of God by doing work of his or her own.

### **Opponents of the Spiritual Disciplines:**

It is at this point that the strongest pushback from certain wings of the Church comes against the practice of the spiritual disciplines. Some, especially in certain conservative and Reformed circles, are extraordinarily sensitive toward anything that might even *hint* at challenging the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone; they therefore speak loudly against any who would preach that we must make an effort toward holiness. As author and pastor Kevin DeYoung writes:

Among conservative Christians there is sometimes the mistaken notion that if we are truly gospel-centered we won’t talk about rules or imperatives or moral exertion. We are so eager not to confuse indicatives (what God has done) and imperatives (what we should do) that we get leery of letting biblical commands

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<sup>26</sup> David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 3. Parenthesis added.

<sup>27</sup> Whitney, 179-80.

lead uncomfortably to conviction of sin. We're scared of words like diligence, effort, and duty. Pastors don't know how to preach the good news in their sermons and still strongly exhort churchgoers to cleanse themselves from every defilement of body and spirit (2 Cor 7:1). We know legalism (salvation by law keeping) and antinomianism (salvation without the need for law keeping) are both wrong, but antinomianism feels like a much safer danger.<sup>28</sup>

This has perhaps been seen best most recently in a series of blog posts between DeYoung and former pastor Tullian Tchividjian (the grandson of Billy Graham) on the Gospel Coalition website in 2011.<sup>29</sup> In these exchanges, while we see DeYoung and Tchividjian bending over backwards to profess great friendship and great agreement theologically, nevertheless, in response to DeYoung's first post about how "effort is not a four letter word," Tchividjian felt a need to respond publicly to what he saw to be a dangerous emphasis.<sup>30</sup> In his first blog post in response to DeYoung, Tchividjian wrote that "Sanctification feeds on justification, not the other way around," that "remembering, revisiting, and rediscovering the reality of our justification every day is the hard work we're called to do if we're going to grow," and that "passively, our work is to receive and rest in his work for us."<sup>31</sup>

As these friends continued to spar over where to put the emphasis in the process of sanctification, they both recognized that they were dredging up an old argument

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<sup>28</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 19.

<sup>29</sup> To read the entirety of these blog posts, go to <http://theaquilareport.com/the-role-of-effort-in-sanctification-a-dialogue-between-kevin-deyoung-and-tullian-tchividjian>. Due to Tchividjian's recent unfortunate moral failings, he is no longer with The Gospel Coalition, and his blog posts can no longer be found on their site.

<sup>30</sup> Kevin DeYoung, "Make Every Effort." *The Gospel Coalition*. June 7, 2011. Accessed August 26, 2017. <https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/kevindeyoung/2011/06/07/make-every-effort>.

<sup>31</sup> Tullian Tchividjian, "Work Hard! But In Which Direction?" *The Gospel Coalition*. June 8, 2011. Quoted in Don K. Clements, "The Role of 'Effort' in Sanctification – a dialogue between Kevin DeYoung and Tullian Tchividjian." *The Aquila Report*. June 20, 2011. Accessed August 26, 2017. <http://theaquilareport.com/the-role-of-effort-in-sanctification-a-dialogue-between-kevin-deyoung-and-tullian-tchividjian>.

arising from the nineteenth century Keswick movement, represented by folks such as Hannah Whitehall Smith, who wrote: “All that we claim, then, in this life of sanctification is that by an act of faith we put ourselves into the hands of the Lord, for Him to work in us all the good pleasure of His will, and then, by a continuous exercise of faith, keep ourselves there.”<sup>32</sup> Folks from this movement essentially counseled believers to “let go, and let God” do the work of sanctification, denying that we had any part to play at all in this process other than having faith. While Tchividjian and others of his stripe certainly do not go this far, they are still uncomfortable with any hearty commendations of the spiritual disciplines, or indeed of any emphasis upon the effort the believer may put forth toward growth in holiness; conversely, DeYoung and those like him are able boldly to write “Sanctification is not by surrender, but by divinely enabled toil and effort.”<sup>33</sup> In fact, DeYoung even quotes from Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

The New Testament calls upon us to take action; it does not tell us that the work of sanctification is going to be done for us . . . We are in the ‘good fight of faith’, and we have to do the fighting. But, thank God, we are enabled to do it; for the moment we believe, and are justified by faith, and are born again of the Spirit of God, we have the ability. So the New Testament method of sanctification is to remind us of that; *and having enabled us of it, it says, ‘Now then, go and do it’*.<sup>34</sup>

We therefore see the two sides arguing over the believer’s participation in the process of salvation: whether he or she is passive and simply thinks fond thoughts of his or her

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<sup>32</sup> Hannah Whitall Smith, *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life* (Grand Rapids: Spire, 1952), 35. DeYoung wryly notes that Smith’s work is an “unfortunate classic,” as “Hannah’s life was not happy, and her theology provided no secret for Christian living.” See Kevin DeYoung, “Gospel Driven Effort.” *The Gospel Coalition*. June 14, 2011. Accessed August 26, 2017.

<https://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/kevindeyoung/2011/06/14/gospel-driven-effort>.

<sup>33</sup> DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness*, 90.

<sup>34</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Exposition of Chapter 6: The New Man* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1972), 178. Quoted in Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness: Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness* (Wheaton, IL, Crossway, 2012), 90 (emphasis by DeYoung).

justification, or whether *going and doing* – always in the Lord’s enabling power – is instead the believer’s calling.

Still, there are those who take this critique of the spiritual disciplines even further, such as Baptist pastor and radio broadcaster Bob DeWaay. In an article critiquing Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*, DeWaay writes, “. . . most of the spiritual disciplines that (Foster) calls ‘means of grace’ are no means of grace at all – but a means of putting oneself under spiritual deception.”<sup>35</sup> Obviously, his distaste for these practices is not something he hides in any way, shape, or form. In one of his radio broadcasts, in fact, he describes them as “human-engineered,” “downright pagan,” “unbiblical,” and even “Wiccan spiritual practices.”<sup>36</sup> His main argument against Foster’s commendation of the spiritual disciplines is that they fly in the face of the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, by which he defines as the truth of God revealed through his “ordained, Spirit-inspired, biblical writers.”<sup>37</sup>

While few would argue with DeWaay’s definition here, many would argue with the assumption he makes throughout his articles and radio broadcasts that God speaks *only* through the biblical writers. He sees the affective, pietistic aspects of the spiritual disciplines as a challenge to the authority of God’s Word in Scripture. To him, the disciplines are no more than mystical practices borrowed from Roman Catholicism (a wing of the Church of whom he does not speak in flattering tones) which lead one on an

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<sup>35</sup> Bob DeWaay, “Richard Foster – Celebration of Deception: Evangelical Mysticism,” *Critical Issues Commentary*, Issue Number 112 (May/June 2009): 1. Accessed August 29, 2017. <http://cicministry.org/articles.php>.

<sup>36</sup> *Critical Issues Commentary*, 2011, “The Dangers of Spiritual Formation, Part 1,” by Bob DeWaay and Dick Kuffel. Broadcast May 16 at [http://www.cicministry.org/radio\\_series.php?series=all](http://www.cicministry.org/radio_series.php?series=all). It was at this point that the author of this thesis very nearly swallowed his tongue in a fit of apoplexy. The thought of Dallas Willard as a Wiccan practitioner is not only laughable – it is dangerous and slanderous. Indeed, if evidence ever comes to light that Willard was a warlock, I will eat my hat.

<sup>37</sup> DeWaay, 1.

inward, spiritual journey – and, in his words, “the Bible nowhere describes an inward journey to explore the realm of the spirit.”<sup>38</sup> Such an inward journey, therefore, being no way to seek the Spirit of God, to DeWaay’s mind can be none other than a way to seek other spirits – or, in short, divination.<sup>39</sup> In the end, the fact that the spiritual disciplines are taught in good Baptist Bible colleges and seminaries is nothing short of “apostasy in our ranks.”<sup>40</sup>

### **The Spiritual Disciplines in Scripture:**

Nevertheless, both Tchividjian’s and DeWaay’s objections lose sight of a profound truth we read in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul puts this best when he writes “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own” (Philippians 3:12, ESV). Here again is the mysterious interplay of the believer’s participation in God’s sanctifying work. First, Christ Jesus has grabbed hold of the believer; the word Paul uses here in the Greek, *katalambano*, is an intensive, aggressive word. It could best be translated “seized hold of.”<sup>41</sup> In response, therefore, because Christ Jesus has seized hold of the believer, the believer therefore responds by seizing hold of him. He or she presses on to achieve this perfection, this attaining to the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:11), this making of Christ Jesus as his or her own.

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<sup>38</sup> DeWaay, 1.

<sup>39</sup> DeWaay, 1.

<sup>40</sup> *Critical Issues Commentary*, “The Dangers of Spiritual Formation, Part 1.”

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Purvis, *The Crucifixion of Ministry: Surrendering Our Ambitions to the Service of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 48.

Just exactly *how* the believer seizes hold of Jesus, thereby “press(ing) on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12, ESV) is the issue at stake here. Certainly, a-la Tchividjian, remembering and revisiting one’s justification is involved; Paul even famously commands the Philippian believers to think on the things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, etc. (Philippians 4:8ff), and the truth of justification in Christ Jesus alone must necessarily be included in that category. Similarly, a-la DeWaay, time spent reading, studying, and pondering the Scriptures is involved in this process, since one could hardly become like Jesus without spending time in his word. Nevertheless, the Scriptures themselves also commend certain other practices, such as prayer, fasting, solitude and silence, and worship and thanksgiving. Even DeWaay himself cannot quibble with the fact that these practices are all found in the word and are practiced by Jesus himself.

For example, in his Sermon on the Mount, we find Jesus teaching on the discipline of prayer; he even begins this portion of the sermon by saying “When you pray . . .,” and not the more wishy-washy “If you pray . . .” (Matthew 6:5, ESV). He then, after some further instructions on how, when, and where to pray, gives the model for prayer we today call “The Lord’s Prayer,” named for him. The Apostle Paul commands believers to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17), while James tells his readers that “the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (James 5:16b). Certainly, no believer could deny the power of prayer as an engine of growth toward greater holiness and fellowship with the Lord.

Neither could any believer deny the power of disciplining one’s self to spend time in Scripture. Psalm 119 is an intricate poem of celebration of God’s word, giving us such



beloved teachings as “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word” (Psalm 119:9, ESV), and “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105, ESV). Paul again, in commanding Timothy to found his ministry in the Scriptures, also exhorts us to do the same by writing that “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16, ESV). Jesus himself even demonstrated the importance of having the word “hidden in his heart” (Psalm 119:11) by using Scripture as his sole defense against the wiles of Satan during his wilderness temptation time. Indeed, with such Scriptural warrant, it is hard to imagine that anyone could truly be a Christian at all without spending time in prayer and the study of Scripture.

Scripture commends other disciplines as well, such as fasting. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also teaches on the necessity of fasting, beginning one section of his teaching with “When you fast . . .” and not “If you fast . . .” (Matthew 6:16, ESV). We also find a host of Scripture’s heroes, from Moses (Exodus 34) to Daniel (Daniel 10) to the early Church (Acts 13) practicing the discipline of fasting. In fact, one could argue that it was Queen Esther’s prayer and fasting which gave her the strength and wisdom needed for her incredible success (Esther 4:16). Similarly, the disciplines of solitude and silence are commended both in the Psalms (“For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence . . .” – Psalm 62:3a, ESV), and in the tendency of Jesus to “withdraw to desolate places and pray” (Luke 5:16, ESV). Moreover, one cannot read the Psalms without also seeing the need for a disciplined practice of both worship and thanksgiving (“Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness” – Psalm 96:9a, ESV; “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his

courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!” – Psalm 100:4, ESV). Even a cursory examination of these Scriptures shows that certain spiritual practices are to be practiced in a habitual, even disciplined way. Through these practices – all of which our Lord Jesus himself practiced and commanded, believers grasp hold of him more and more as they train themselves for godliness (1 Timothy 4:7).<sup>42</sup>

### **Preaching the Spiritual Disciplines:**

Nevertheless, this need for sanctification, its ins-and-outs and intricacies, and the part the spiritual disciplines play, all must be commended in a faithful, winsome way to the people of God. In fact, the very Gospel itself must be proclaimed to God’s people consistently, passionately, and with as much care and warmth as possible. The Christian faith is one that comes by hearing, and specifically through hearing the word of Jesus Christ (Romans 10:17). Yet, as Paul asks so eloquently earlier in Romans 10, “. . . how are they to hear without someone preaching?” (Romans 10:14c, ESV).

While there are a variety of ways one can hear the Good News today – from television to radio to podcasts – and while the Bible has never been more available to so many people in so many forms and translations than in any other time in history, still there is something mysteriously powerful about the *preaching* of the Word of God. Haddon Robinson writes, “No one who takes the Bible seriously should count preaching out. To the New Testament writers, preaching stood as the event through which God

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<sup>42</sup> For a deeper examination of many of these disciplines and their Scriptural warrants, and particularly for a more in-depth exegetical examination of the Scripture passages chosen for this sermon series, see Chapter Four.

works.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, as we have already seen, along with the sacraments and the classic spiritual disciplines, the preaching of the Words is a means of God’s grace, ordained as a way he has chosen to communicate grace to his people. Calvin recognizes this powerful mystery when he writes, “We see how God, who could in a moment perfect his own, nevertheless desires them to grow up into manhood solely under the education of the church. We see the way set for it: the preaching of the heavenly doctrine has been enjoined upon the pastors.”<sup>44</sup> Later, he writes, “. . . the power to save rests with God . . . but (as Paul again testifies) He displays and unfolds it in the preaching of the gospel.”<sup>45</sup> Heinrich Bullinger sums this up in the document he wrote which came to be called “The Second Helvetic Confession”:

THE PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WORD OF GOD.  
Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good.<sup>46</sup>

When one considers the implications of how the Word proclaimed can be received in this way – as if given from God himself, as a means of his grace, one cannot help but be overwhelmed and humbled.

For this reason, and for the simple reason that there is no other time in the course of my work as a pastor that I have such a large “captive” audience, I have therefore chosen to undertake this sermon series in which I proclaim the power of these ancient,

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<sup>43</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 2.

<sup>44</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.5.

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.5.

<sup>46</sup> Heinrich Bullinger, “The Second Helvetic Confession.” In *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, part 1, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 1996), 5.004.

biblical practices as a means toward greater holiness in the process of sanctification – for this is one of the greatest needs, I believe, both in the Church at large, and in the congregation in which I serve. There are certainly other ways I could have undertaken this thesis-project. I could have again taught another class on the disciplines, following up on the one I taught in the summer of 2015. I could have held a church-wide retreat, during which I taught and facilitated discussions and small-group practice sessions. Nevertheless, the proclamation of the Word in worship communicates the grace of God in a way like no other practice – and I desire this communication of grace for my congregation in the most powerful and effective way possible. “For,” as Calvin writes, “among the many excellent gifts with which God has adorned the human race, it is a singular privilege that he deigns to consecrate to himself the mouths and tongues of men in order that his voice may resound in them.”<sup>47</sup>

### **The Spiritual Disciplines: Answers to a Personal Quandary**

At the same time, this is, in many ways, the result of a long journey of searching for answers to many of my personal and professional questions. This process really began for me in my college theology classes, when I first dipped my toes in the theology behind this process of sanctification. I remember reading Calvin and Luther during this time and delighting in their bold genius as they gave names and categories to things I had perhaps intuited before, but had never truly grasped. As I continued to read and study in both college and seminary, though, and especially as I wrestled with issues of holiness and sanctification in my own life, I began to read a little more critically. I found myself

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<sup>47</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.5.

writing the letters “YBH” over and over the margins of books about the Christian life – a peculiar abbreviation of mine which stands for “Yes, but how?” I read over and over about putting sins to death, about coming alive in Jesus Christ, about growing in prayer, in the knowledge of Scripture, in patience, peace, joy, and self-control – and yet, over and over, I kept asking “Yes, but how?” as I found myself failing time and again, no matter how much I gritted my teeth, “put my back into it,” or threw myself into the breaking of old habits and the cultivation of new ones. After all, after years of effort, one should feel that one has made *some* kind of progress! As author and pastor Kevin DeYoung writes, “sanctification is like a man walking up the stairs with a yo-yo. There are a lot of ups and downs, but ultimate progress nonetheless.”<sup>48</sup> For many years, in spite of great effort, I only ever felt like I was falling down those steps after managing to trip over the yo-yo string.

As a pastor, I would also find myself occasionally being asked these “YBH” questions from parishioners who, as noted in chapter one, *knew* that there was “something more,”<sup>49</sup> who knew that they should be better at praying, better at patience, better at a host of other virtues and practices, and yet kept finding themselves failing time and again. I still am asked these questions today – as to how a person can truly grow and become more Christ-like? What is the process for that? What tools can we avail ourselves of to accomplish this? Before I engaged in this project, I was always at a bit of a loss for what to say other than “try harder, pray more, read more Scripture, give thanks more” and the like – answers which, while not necessarily false, still would not have

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<sup>48</sup> DeYoung, *The Hole in Our Holiness*, 138. DeYoung credits author and psychiatrist David Powlinson for this illustration but provides no citations.

<sup>49</sup> Catherine Marshall, *Something More: In Search of a Deeper Faith* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974), xv.

satisfied me if I had been the one asking the questions. With this project, however, I believe I have found something more practical, more substantive, and more satisfactory: I believe that the *proper* practice of the spiritual disciplines – for the right reasons, with the right attitude – gives us the tools we need to engage in this process of growth and sanctification with the Lord God through the power of His Holy Spirit.

### **Conclusion:**

This is not a particularly “sexy” answer. It is not slick and cutting-edge, nor is it a gimmick one can easily package in bright and shiny colors so that it will sell a million units at a Christian bookstore. Instead, to some extent, helping to direct a brother or sister in the faith toward greater maturity in the faith is a somewhat subjective, experiential process. There are no cookie-cutter Christians, nor are believers mere mechanical automata – rather, the Church is made up of distinct individuals with discrete personalities and needs. There is no one-size-fits-all answer or program. Nevertheless, what can be said is that for all believers, true sanctification – dying to the old self and coming alive in Christ – takes time. It takes discipline. It takes the exercise of some very old practices commended down through history by the Church. Believers are called to train in godliness over a lifetime. As Jay Adams writes, “You may have sought and tried to obtain *instant godliness*. There is no such thing . . . We want somebody to give us three easy steps to godliness, and we’ll take them next Friday and be godly. The trouble is, godliness doesn’t come that way.”<sup>50</sup> Instead, to quote Jerry Bridges, “Discipline is structured training . . . We must correct, mold, and train our moral character.”<sup>51</sup> The

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<sup>50</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Godliness Through Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, Reprinted 1973), 3.

<sup>51</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1978), 98-99.

classic spiritual disciplines are practices which provide the needed structure to accomplish that corrective training.

Again, these disciplines must be practiced in the right spirit, and for the right ends. The believer must be intentional about opening him- or herself up to the work of the Holy Spirit – the primary actor in the process of our sanctification. The disciplines must not be practiced as a means unto themselves, but in the hopes of catching the Spirit’s winds in one’s proverbial sails so that one may move forward toward the prize of greater maturity and greater fellowship with Jesus Christ – the crown of life, which is imperishable and invaluable.<sup>52</sup> The believer must press forward in his or her training, even though discipline is monotonous or painful at times, knowing that the end to which he or she is straining will make all that strain worthwhile. Believers are called to submit themselves to keep in step with the Spirit’s work (Galatians 5:25), trusting that he is leading them to greater conformity to Christ, all the while remembering that this submission and these disciplines are ultimately a means for joy in the Lord, and a means for His glory.<sup>53</sup> For indeed, as Richard Foster was wont to whisper to his son Nathan, “Nate, can’t you see? The end result of practicing the disciplines is actually *joy!*”<sup>54</sup> In the next chapter, I will discuss more specifics with regard to these disciplines and means, and what a variety of authors have to say about them for the good of the Church, and for the attainment of that joy and glory.

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<sup>52</sup> Whitney, 179-180.

<sup>53</sup> Mathis, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Nathan Foster, 18.

## CHAPTER THREE

### LITERATURE REVIEW

As has already been noted earlier, the practice of the spiritual disciplines is a very old one – one that has long been taught and studied in the history of the Church. For this reason, there has been a great deal of literature written about using these disciplines in our “training for godliness” (1 Timothy 4:8). In this chapter, I will look at some of the more prominent literature published over the years to see what it has to say on these matters. While this can in no way be a complete or even thorough survey, it can at least provide a “grand sweep” through some of the most influential entries in the spiritual discipline canon, and how they relate to the particular spiritual disciplines that I have focused on in this thesis-project: prayer, the Scripture disciplines, fasting, solitude and silence, and worship and thanksgiving.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Benedict:**

Any discussion of the use of the disciplines in the Church must begin with *The Rule of St. Benedict*, often cited as Western monasticism at its best.<sup>2</sup> Benedict lived in deeply troubled times: the Western Roman Empire had been overrun by barbarians, and during much of Benedict’s life, his native Italy was the site of nearly constant fighting as various Germanic tribes invaded, and as the Eastern emperor tried to re-conquer Rome.<sup>3</sup> In the midst of such a strife-torn world, this Rule offered “definitive direction, and

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of why I have chosen these particular disciplines, see Chapter Four.

<sup>2</sup> Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), 127.

<sup>3</sup> Rev. Timothy Fry, O.S.B., Preface to *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 9.



established an ordered way of life that gave security and stability.”<sup>4</sup> A perusal of this Rule – still being followed by Benedictine monks and nuns around the world more than fifteen centuries later – reveals a plan for an ordered, intentional life, though not one that is unduly harsh. Benedict himself considered his work “a little rule for beginners,”<sup>5</sup> and “a school for the Lord’s service,”<sup>6</sup> all for the glory of God, and in order to “amend faults and to safeguard love.”<sup>7</sup>

To this end, Benedict lists “The Tools for Good Works” in one of his early chapters. Among these, quite a number of the classic spiritual disciplines are listed out, including the disciplines that are the focus of this thesis-project. Regarding prayer, he writes that a monk is to “devote (himself) often to prayer,”<sup>8</sup> and that “every day with tears and sighs” he is to “confess (his) past sins to God in prayer.”<sup>9</sup> With regard to Scripture, a brother is to “listen readily to holy reading,”<sup>10</sup> as well as devoting himself to the two Great Commandments and the Ten Commandments,<sup>11</sup> though Benedict does not clarify if this is to be a more contemplative devotion to these commandments, or a more active obedience to them, or perhaps both. A brother is to “love fasting,”<sup>12</sup> and to “refrain from too much eating.”<sup>13</sup> He is also to “guard (his) lips from harmful or deceptive speech”<sup>14</sup> and to “prefer moderation in speech.”<sup>15</sup> Beyond these, Benedict also

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<sup>4</sup> Fry, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Fry, O.S.B., ed. *The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 73:8.

<sup>6</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, Prologue:45.

<sup>7</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, Prologue:47.

<sup>8</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:56.

<sup>9</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:57.

<sup>10</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:55.

<sup>11</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:1-7.

<sup>12</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:13.

<sup>13</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:36.

<sup>14</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:51.

<sup>15</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:52.

commends other disciplines not considered in this project, such as confession,<sup>16</sup> service,<sup>17</sup> and guidance.<sup>18</sup> These “tools of the spiritual craft,” laid out rather haphazardly, are commended to the brothers to be used “without ceasing, day and night” so that “on judgment day, our wages will be the reward the Lord has promised.”<sup>19</sup>

Benedict is not content, however, simply to list these tools for his “school for the Lord’s service”<sup>20</sup> – he also spells out the practice of several of these disciplines elsewhere in his Rule. He devotes whole chapters to the disciplines of worship and prayer, including laying down the eight times each day during which brothers are to celebrate the Divine Office (Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline, and Matins/Vigils),<sup>21</sup> which Psalms are to be sung when,<sup>22</sup> and how these are to be amended during different times of day and different seasons of the year.<sup>23</sup> Benedict also devotes two chapters to restraint in speech, and the “Great Silence,” which is practiced after the evening office of Compline.<sup>24</sup> He also has a chapter on reverence in prayer,<sup>25</sup> and several chapters on the regulation of food and drink.<sup>26</sup> Still, even after seventy-three chapters of instructions and regulations, Benedict still admits that his Rule is only the “beginning of perfection,” and that it was a “tool for the cultivation of virtue.”<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Gregory the Great commended this Rule for its discretion, while others have cited this quality as

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<sup>16</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:50.

<sup>17</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:14-19.

<sup>18</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:61.

<sup>19</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 4:75-77.

<sup>20</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, Prologue: 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, 16:5.

<sup>22</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, chapters 9 and 17-19.

<sup>23</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, chapters 9-19.

<sup>24</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, chapters 6 and 42.

<sup>25</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, chapter 20.

<sup>26</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, chapters 39-41.

<sup>27</sup> *Rule of St. Benedict*, chapter 73 title, as well as 73:2-6 in which Benedict lists a variety of other tools which “make us blush for shame at being so slothful, so unobservant, so negligent” (73:7).

the singular reason why the Rule is still so widely practiced.<sup>28</sup> In laying down a pattern practice of the spiritual disciplines as a means of sanctification, Benedict codified a tradition for later generations to follow. It would not be forgotten.

### **Thomas `a Kempis:**

For the next several centuries, it would be those in this monastic tradition who would nurture the idea of the importance of the disciplines. Contributing to this is the book “the circulation of which has exceeded that of any other product of the Middle Ages”: *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas `a Kempis.<sup>29</sup> Thomas was a monk in the Brethren of the Common Life, a Dutch order rooted in the mystical tradition of Meister Eckhart and Gerhard Groot. As such, rather than writing a Rule like Benedict, he instead wrote what has become a devotional classic – a book to nurture the believer’s piety. Central to his writing is an aspiration to “simple, mystical devotion to Christ,”<sup>30</sup> and the assumption that:

... the true Christian should, as far as possible, attempt to imitate the model given him in the life and work of Christ. To succeed in such an effort means to discover the spiritual, the interior life, and to turn aside from the pursuits of the world. Christlike attitudes – humility, self-discipline, love for others, submission to authority – must be cultivated if a life lived in imitation to Christ is to be realized.<sup>31</sup>

In the spirit of this self-discipline, we find Thomas commending “spiritual exercises,” or what are today more commonly called spiritual disciplines, including several which are the focus of this thesis-project. He counsels his readers that they

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<sup>28</sup> Fry, Preface, 11.

<sup>29</sup> Walker, 255.

<sup>30</sup> Walker, 255.

<sup>31</sup> Paul M. Bechtel, Introduction to *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas `a Kempis (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 19-20.

should “Never be entirely idle; but either be reading or writing, or praying, or meditating, or endeavoring something for the public good.”<sup>32</sup> Chief among these exercises is the reading and study of Scripture – in fact, it has been noted that the whole of Thomas’s work is grounded in Scripture itself:

The book has as its foundation biblical text – more than a thousand of them – a wonderful mosaic of arrangement, brought together in an organic union. Its secret as a devotional classic lies in its constant drawing of refreshing strength from the Scriptures; nearly every book of the Bible is represented, though it draws chiefly from the Psalms, the gospels, and the epistles.<sup>33</sup>

Fittingly, then, Thomas devotes an entire chapter of his work to the “Reading of the Holy Scriptures,” where he avers that “Truth, not eloquence, is to be sought for in Holy Scripture,” and “If thou desire to reap profit, read with humility, simplicity, and faithfulness; nor ever desire the reputation of learning.”<sup>34</sup> Thomas rightly recognizes and recommends that the most logical way to imitate Christ is to devote one’s self to the Word of Christ.

Fittingly for a mystic in the monastic tradition, Thomas also spends an entire chapter commending the benefits of the disciplines of solitude and silence. He writes that the believer should “seek a convenient time to retire into thyself, and meditate often upon God’s loving-kindnesses,” and “He therefore that intends to attain to the more inward and spiritual things of religion, must with Jesus depart from the multitude and press of people.”<sup>35</sup> Thomas does not recommend emptiness in silence in solitude, however, nor does he counsel these disciplines simply for the sake of contemplating one’s navel, as

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas `a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 58.

<sup>33</sup> Bechtel, 19.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas `a Kempis, 32-33.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas `a Kempis, 60-61.

some Eastern mystics are sometimes caricatured as doing.<sup>36</sup> Rather, he writes that “in silence and in stillness a religious soul advances herself, and learneth the mysteries of Holy Scripture,”<sup>37</sup> for “there she findeth rivers of tears, wherein she may every night wash and cleanse herself; that she may be so much the more familiar with her Creator, by how much the farther off she liveth from all worldly disquiet.”<sup>38</sup> While much of Thomas’s work is contemplative, focusing on the inner world of the mind and spirit, he does recognize that some of these outward disciplines are useful, and even necessary, for the believer if he or she is to gain vitality in a relationship with the Lord, and true Christ-likeness.

### **Richard Foster:**

While the practice of the disciplines was nurtured for centuries in this monastic tradition, and while it was picked up and further commended by those in the Reformation tradition (as seen in the discussion of the works of Luther, Calvin, and of the various Reformation catechisms cited in chapter two), nevertheless the importance of the disciplines did not really come back into focus again in the modern era until the publication of Richard Foster’s seminal work *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* in 1978. As Foster’s son Nathan has written, this book:

has sold some two million copies in English and has been translated into twenty-five other languages. It continues to be taught in multiple settings from seminaries and universities to Sunday schools and home study groups. It is beginning to be referenced in history books for its influence on Christianity.

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<sup>36</sup> Fun fact: A person who *does* contemplate his or her navel is called an “omphalopsychite,” and the practice itself is referred to as “omphaloskepsis.” These are not pieces of information I am able to work into many papers.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas `a Kempis, 63. In his writing, Thomas often refers to the soul in the feminine.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas `a Kempis, 63.

Many have noted that my dad's work helped launch a movement toward what we know today as spiritual formation.<sup>39</sup>

Part of the revolution of Foster's book was its reclaiming of this tradition of spiritual formation as found in the practice of the disciplines. In fact, he included a footnote in his first chapter to explain this:

You may be wondering why the Disciplines described in this book are termed "classical." They are not classical merely because they are ancient, although they have been practiced by sincere people over the centuries. The Disciplines are classical because they are *central* to experiential Christianity. In one form or another all of the devotional masters have affirmed the necessity of the Disciplines.<sup>40</sup>

It seems appropriate that Foster, a Quaker, and therefore rooted in the pietistic wing of the Christian faith, should be interested in reclaiming practices which are "central to experiential Christianity" – practices which answer that perplexing "YBH" (Yes, but how?) question asked by so many believers like myself. Foster looked backward to the long monastic tradition, and, in a way, fused it with his own Protestant, experiential tradition. The result was a new – and yet, at the same time, old – movement within the Church, much like the new – and yet, at the same time, old – endeavor undertaken for this thesis-project.

In his work, Foster focuses on twelve disciplines that he commends to the Church. As noted before, they are: meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration. He organizes these disciplines into three categories of four each: the inward disciplines (meditation, prayer, fasting, and study), the outward disciplines (simplicity, solitude, submission, and

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<sup>39</sup> Nathan Foster, *The Making of an Ordinary Saint: My Journey From Frustration to Joy with the Spiritual Disciplines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 13.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), footnote on page 1.

service), and the corporate disciplines (confession, worship, guidance, and celebration). In so doing, Foster wisely recognizes that not all disciplines are practiced the same way, and that not all disciplines perform the same function. Believers need a variety of habits and practices which can discipline the inner life, the outer life, and life lived in the midst of others. Few believers take the time to consider these distinctions – a lapse which Foster seeks to remedy. For this reason, when choosing particular disciplines to focus on for this thesis-project, I was sure to choose practices from all three categories to commend to my congregation, as I wished their exposure to the disciplines to be a well-rounded one.

One strong point Foster seeks to emphasize throughout his work is the importance of the *why* with the disciplines. He laments that far too many focus on the *how* of the disciplines – *how* one should pray, *how long* one should read Scripture, *how often* one should fast, etc. Channeling a thought that would have pleased the devotional master `a Kempis, Foster writes: “To know the mechanics does not mean that we are practicing the Disciplines. The Spiritual Disciplines are an inward and spiritual reality, and the inner attitude of the heart is far more crucial than the mechanics for coming into the reality of the spiritual life.”<sup>41</sup> Rather, he writes, “God has given us the Disciplines of the spiritual life as a means of receiving his grace. The Disciplines allow believers to place themselves before God so that he can transform us.”<sup>42</sup> Failing to keep this distinction in mind can quickly turn the disciplines from joyful means of grace into what he calls “another set of soul-killing laws. Law-bound Disciplines breathe death.”<sup>43</sup> Foster

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<sup>41</sup> Richard Foster, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Foster, 7.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Foster, 9.

continually strives to maintain this wonderful balance between the inward, grace-filled focus and the outward, habit-oriented mechanics of the disciplines – a balance of which believers must be constantly reminded if they wish the disciplines to be effective, and one which I strove to keep in mind as I commended these disciplines to my congregation.

### **Nathan Foster:**

Foster's own son, Nathan Foster, adds to and enhances his father's towering, landmark work by piggy-backing upon it with a work of his own: *The Making of an Ordinary Saint: My Journey From Frustration to Joy with the Spiritual Disciplines*. As the title suggests, in this book, published in 2014, Nathan Foster lays out a narrative of his own experience with the disciplines, born out of a midlife crisis, an intense daydream, and a general dissatisfaction with the Church and with his own spiritual life.<sup>44</sup> As he writes in his introduction:

What if I spent an entire year intentionally and intensely working on my spiritual life, following the instruction from one of my father's books? The project would be to creatively and intentionally work with what he had outlined in his book *Celebration of Discipline* as twelve historic practices of the Christian faith . . . I was beginning a journey into modern-day "monkhood," though of course without the robes or celibacy.<sup>45</sup>

Foster then goes on to detail this immersive project, which actually ballooned from one year to four years in length. Richard Foster himself contributes to the book by writing a brief summary of each discipline before each corresponding chapter telling the story of his son's experience of that discipline.

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<sup>44</sup> Nathan Foster, 13-16.

<sup>45</sup> Nathan Foster, 16.



Nathan Foster is brutally honest throughout his book, whether detailing failures and frustrations with practices such as fasting or celebration, or in relating how the practice of the discipline of confession led him to confront much of the baggage of his troubled past, and led him to visit each of the places where he had lived in his life in the hopes of breaking free from the guilt and shame of sins committed there. Interspersed in the narrative are little nuggets of conversations he has with his father about his experiences, and on two occasions he breaks the narrative to discuss what he terms as two “discipline hazards”: self-hatred, and legalism, which he terms his “inner Pharisee.” In the end, he concludes that:

I no longer see the disciplines as something unattainable, reserved for the super spiritual or stuffy monkish folks. Practicing the disciplines rather feels like a gentle and graceful attunement to seeking God in the everyday mess and simple things.<sup>46</sup>

What is most interesting, however, besides the fascination of reading through an actual, lived-out experience of the disciplines – and from Richard Foster’s own son, to boot! – is another insight from his conclusion:

In a sense there is only one discipline: an active response to a loving God. It is the process of presenting our will and our lives as a living sacrifice before a good, strong, and caring Father. We learn to respond to the prompting of the Spirit; we hear and obey. This is the call of all Christians.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, this *is* the call of all Christians; God’s people are called to participate with the work of the Holy Spirit as he seeks to make them holy, to make them more like Jesus – and Foster has done just this and has shown us that it is possible to live it out. There are a variety of disciplines we can use to do this – in this project, I am only focusing on a handful of them – but whatever the discipline, there is only one end, one goal: to respond

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<sup>46</sup> Nathan Foster, 189.

<sup>47</sup> Nathan Foster, 191.

to the love of God given in Christ Jesus. Foster's experience details how this is not always an easy, straight-line proposition; at times it takes difficult and exhausting turns. Nevertheless, as he writes, "joy prevails."<sup>48</sup>

### **Dallas Willard:**

Another giant in the field one must consider in any study of the spiritual disciplines is the late Dallas Willard – cited by Richard Foster as one of the three greatest influences in his life and ministry.<sup>49</sup> Willard's book *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* is often the number two book cited after Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* as a must-read for understanding the spiritual disciplines. While Foster structures his work around individual examinations of the various disciplines themselves, Willard is more interested in getting behind those disciplines; he seeks to drill down deep into the purpose and method of those practices, in order to, as he puts in the subtitle of his book, "understand how God changes lives." In typical Willard style, therefore, while his book has immense practical applications, it is essentially a book of theory and principle. He is seeking to understand the truth behind the problem of how we human beings can change, grow, and be sanctified.

To Willard, the bulk of our human problems are essentially spiritual problems, and therefore require spiritual answers. If humans are to be transformed into the likeness of Christ, then appropriately Christ-like practices and solutions must be employed.

Therefore, he writes:

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<sup>48</sup> Nathan Foster, 194.

<sup>49</sup> Richard Foster, xiii-xiv. Willard was actually a member of the first congregation Foster pastored right out of seminary – a small Quaker congregation in southern California. See Richard Foster, xiv.

My central claim is that we *can* become like Christ by doing one thing – by following him in the overall style of life he chose for himself. If we have faith in Christ, we must believe that he knew how to live. We can, through faith and grace, become like Christ by practicing the types of activities he himself practiced in order to remain constantly at home in the fellowship of his Father.<sup>50</sup>

This intentional practicing of Christ-like activities – much like that which Thomas `a Kempis commended to his readers – will, Willard avers, remove the disconnect that he sees in the Church today:

Faith today is treated as something that only *should* make us different, not that actually *does* or *can* make us different. In reality we *vainly* struggle against the evils of this world, waiting to die and go to heaven. Somehow we've gotten the idea that the essence of faith is entirely a mental and inward thing.<sup>51</sup>

Willard sees the intentional practice of the disciplines as a way to remedy this disconnect – as a way we can not only meet the Lord, but also dwell with the Lord.<sup>52</sup> To him, “full participation in the life of God’s Kingdom and in the vivid companionship of Christ comes to us only through appropriate exercise in the disciplines for life in the spirit.”<sup>53</sup> This insight is one which has grounded much of this thesis-project, and is one that I greatly hope has taken root in the spiritual lives of my congregation.

One interesting insight in Willard’s work comes from his organization of the disciplines: he splits the practices into Disciplines of Abstinence and Disciplines of Engagement. Among the Disciplines of Abstinence, he lists: solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice; among the Disciplines of Engagements he lists: study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission.<sup>54</sup>

Willard believes that believers should practice a broad range of activities from each of

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<sup>50</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperOne, 1988), ix.

<sup>51</sup> Willard, x.

<sup>52</sup> Willard, xi.

<sup>53</sup> Willard, 26.

<sup>54</sup> Willard, 158.

these lists, as the Disciplines of Abstinence will help us break our sins of commission, while the Disciplines of Engagement will help us break our sins of omission.<sup>55</sup> For this project, therefore, I was sure to choose disciplines from both lists to commend to the congregation, as, like all believers, Presbyterians in the Cincinnati tristate area commit both kinds of sins. In the end, though, no matter how one organizes the disciplines, when they are practiced faithfully and adapted to meet our individual needs of time and place, they “will be more than adequate to help us receive the full Christ-life and become the kind of person that should emerge in the following of him.”<sup>56</sup> While Willard goes much deeper into the Biblical and theological theory and theology behind this conclusion than is possible in this chapter, as I have already noted, it is essentially the main idea behind this thesis-project.

### **John Ortberg:**

Just as Nathan Foster piggy-backed on his father Richard’s *Celebration of Discipline* with a book of his own, so does John Ortberg piggy-back on Dallas Willard’s *The Spirit of the Disciplines* with his 1997 work *The Life You’ve Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People*. While Willard’s work is aimed more toward pastors, teachers, and academics, as Ortberg’s title suggests, his work is aimed toward the “ordinary people” in the pews, and as such, has a much more breezy style.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, as Ortberg often cites Willard as his mentor, teacher, and friend, it is not hard to see Willard’s fingerprints all over Ortberg’s work. Like Willard, Ortberg wants to answer

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<sup>55</sup> Willard, 175-176.

<sup>56</sup> Willard, 191.

<sup>57</sup>A group from my congregation actually studied this book together during the summer of 2016. It was very well received.

the question “How do I grow?” – only he wants to answer this question for laypeople who do not normally wade through a more scholarly treatise on the subject.<sup>58</sup> In his preface, he addresses his reader thusly: “. . . If you have ever been frustrated with what you know of spiritual life, ever wondered if real change is possible, ever felt confused or stuck – you’re my kind of person. I wrote this book for you.”<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps Ortberg’s most powerful insight in the book is the Church’s utter lack of expectation of transformation for her members. Citing the example of a cranky parishioner named “Hank,” Ortberg writes:

We expected that Hank would affirm certain religious beliefs. We expected that he would attend services, read the Bible, support the church financially, pray regularly, and avoid certain sins. But here’s what we didn’t expect: *We didn’t expect that he would progressively become the way Jesus would be if he were in Hank’s place.*<sup>60</sup>

Too often, Ortberg writes, believers think in terms of the minimum requirements for getting into heaven, while God wants to accomplish the glorious redemption of His people’s lives – and not just their spiritual lives, but their whole lives.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, God’s people instead focus on what he calls “Boundary-Marker Spirituality”: i.e., a fixation on outward identity signals, such as the avoidance of smoking and drinking. In some Christian circles, teaching that believers should shun these kinds behaviors is considered almost the whole of good discipleship. The problem is that these outward boundary markers do not get down into the heart of a person – and at times, can even end up leading God’s people away from true love and grace. In its vilest form, this kind of

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<sup>58</sup> John Ortberg, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 11.

<sup>59</sup> Ortberg, 11.

<sup>60</sup> Ortberg, 32.

<sup>61</sup> Ortberg, 29, 17.

transformation can lead to, in the words of Mark Twain, “a good man in the worst sense of the word.”<sup>62</sup> This is what Ortberg’s “Hank” was – and every congregation has a “Hank” or two, including my own. The key, he writes, is to move beyond mere trying into true training,<sup>63</sup> for “Jesus’ followers are those who intentionally arrange their lives around the goal of spiritual transformation – the development of a well-ordered heart.”<sup>64</sup> His work shows that ordinary believers today – even those who maybe wonder if change really is possible – nevertheless can become good men and women in the better sense of that term, if they intentionally put into practice a spiritual plan for transformation in Jesus’ Name.<sup>65</sup> Again, this insight, also taught in Willard’s seminal work, is one which has grounded this particular thesis-project.

### **Donald Whitney:**

If Foster and Willard are the two great giants in the literature on the spiritual disciplines, then the third giant would most certainly be Donald Whitney, author of the 1991 work *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. (This is perhaps best seen in the fact that Bob DeWaay, whose work was discussed in the previous chapter, devoted whole issues of his *Critical Issues Commentary* to attacking these three authors and their respective books by name.)<sup>66</sup> Whitney grounds his entire book upon Paul’s instruction in

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<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Ortberg, 38. Source unknown.

<sup>63</sup> Ortberg, 45ff.

<sup>64</sup> Ortberg, 202.

<sup>65</sup> Ortberg, 203-204.

<sup>66</sup> For DeWaay’s attack on Dallas Willard, see “The Dangers of Spiritual Formation and Spiritual Disciplines,” *Critical Issues Commentary*, Issue Number 91 (November/December 2005). For his attack on Richard Foster, see “Richard Foster – Celebration of Deception: Evangelical Mysticism,” *Critical Issues Commentary*, Issue Number 112 (May/June 2009). For his attack on Donald Whitney, see “Donald Whitney and Spiritual Disciplines: Spirituality Without Boundaries,” *Critical Issues Commentary*, Issue Number 111 (March/April 2009). All journals available at <http://cicministry.org/articles.php>.

1 Timothy 4:7: “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (NASB), a verse which grounded my first introductory sermon for this thesis-project. In fact, each of Whitney’s chapter titles includes this phrase – e.g., “Worship . . . For the Purpose of Godliness”.<sup>67</sup> Beginning with the provocative statement that “discipline without direction is drudgery,”<sup>68</sup> Whitney then goes on to explain that,

Whatever the Discipline, its most important feature is its purpose. Just as there is little value in practicing the scales on a guitar or piano apart from the purpose of playing music, there is little value in practicing Spiritual Disciplines apart from the single purpose that unites them . . . That purpose is godliness. Thus we are told in 1 Timothy 4:7 to discipline ourselves “*for the purpose of godliness.*”<sup>69</sup>

When practiced for this purpose of godliness, Whitney writes, these disciplines are then “ways we can place ourselves in the path of God’s grace,” much like “Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus placed themselves in Jesus’ path and sought Him.”<sup>70</sup> This is actually our Christian duty, he writes, for “the Lord expects us to permanently affix ourselves to those devotional practices that promote Godliness.”<sup>71</sup> Therefore, just as there is great freedom in embracing the disciplines, there is also a corresponding danger in neglecting them.<sup>72</sup> Again, as with the other authors examined here, Whitney returns to the pattern for our disciplines, Jesus himself, noting that he was “the most disciplined Man who ever lived and yet the most joyful and passionately alive. He is our Example of discipline.”<sup>73</sup>

Like Foster, Whitney orients the structure of his book by devoting a chapter or two to each of a long list of disciplines. Besides an introductory and concluding chapter on the purpose for the disciplines and perseverance in them, Whitney writes on Bible

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<sup>67</sup> Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), 85.

<sup>68</sup> Whitney, 15.

<sup>69</sup> Whitney, 17.

<sup>70</sup> Whitney, 19.

<sup>71</sup> Whitney, 20.

<sup>72</sup> Whitney, 23, 22.

<sup>73</sup> Whitney, 24.

Intake (two chapters), prayer, worship, evangelism, serving, stewardship, fasting, solitude and silence, journaling, and learning. The reader may note that again, all of the disciplines chosen for the purposes of this thesis-project are represented here. Like Ortberg, Whitney writes in a style that is accessible to the person in the pews, and yet, like Willard, he is also keen to expound upon the why and the how of the disciplines. Also like the other authors examined here, Whitney notes that “there are no shortcuts to Godliness.”<sup>74</sup> Attaining it is slow work that requires perseverance and the powerful work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>75</sup> His work, while perhaps not as flashy or provocative as Foster’s or Willard’s is still a solid, practical entry into the field of spiritual disciplines literature, and as such, should be commended to all who wish to train for Christlike godliness.

### **David Mathis:**

One of the newest offerings in the field of the spiritual disciplines comes from David Mathis; his work *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines* was published in 2016 and continues the commendation of these classic practices to the Church. Mathis is the executive editor at [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org); he is also a pastor in Minneapolis, and a professor at Bethlehem College and Seminary. Many in the Western Church today recognize that two of those job titles are directly connected to the work of John Piper (indeed, Piper even wrote the Foreword for the book!), who is the founder of the movement known as Christian Hedonism. This movement is centered on the idea that “. . . God’s ultimate goal in the world (his glory) and our deepest desire (to be happy) are one and the same, because God is most glorified in us when we are most

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<sup>74</sup> Whitney, 246.

<sup>75</sup> Whitney, 237-245.



satisfied in him.”<sup>76</sup> Mathis, therefore, who also cites Whitney’s *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* as one of the foundational books for his work,<sup>77</sup> locates the disciplines within this Christian Hedonism framework, writing “The note that we will strike again and again, without any apology, is that the means of grace, fleshed out in our various habits of grace, are to be for us *means of joy* in God, and thus means of his glory.”<sup>78</sup> Mathis teaches that God “stands ready to pour out his wonderfully wild and lavish grace;”<sup>79</sup> To this incredible abundance, the Church is called to respond.

Again, the way that God’s people do so is through the classic spiritual disciplines. Showing that he is aware of the controversies surrounding the nature of sanctification discussed here in Chapter Two regarding the interplay of God’s grace and humankind’s response in that process, Mathis writes that he prefers the terms “habits” and “means of grace” to “spiritual disciplines”, as he feels that these terms are less apt for misinterpretation, in that these terms keep the focus more on God’s grace than upon our efforts.<sup>80</sup> Still, he recognizes that “whatever the term, the key is that God has revealed certain channels through which he regularly pours out his favor. And we’re foolish not to take his word on them and build habits of spiritual life around them.”<sup>81</sup> Throughout his book, Mathis strives to keep these two aspects in balance – hence his title *Habits of Grace*. God’s grace is the operating factor, and yet his people’s response in developing

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<sup>76</sup> “Christian Hedonism: A Topical Survey,” desiringGod, accessed October 12, 2017. <https://www.desiringgod.org/topics/christian-hedonism#>.

<sup>77</sup> David Mathis, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus Through the Spiritual Disciplines* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 15, footnote 1.

<sup>78</sup> Mathis, 19.

<sup>79</sup> Mathis, 19.

<sup>80</sup> Mathis, 25, footnote 3.

<sup>81</sup> Mathis, 26.

godly habits to receive that grace is also a factor in this equation. Those who seek joy in him will do so in these ways.

Unlike any of the organizational systems for the disciplines which have been examined here, Mathis uses a three-fold system – he recognizes three different areas in which God pours out his grace to his people: word, prayer, and fellowship.<sup>82</sup> He therefore organizes his book around these three areas, devoting six chapters to each of them, with a “coda” of three short chapters tacked on at the end. While this naturally leaves out a goodly number of the classic spiritual disciplines from his survey (including several which are the focus of this thesis-project), and therefore results in a book only half as long as some others examined here, nevertheless Mathis writes that this was his intention all along. “I make no pretense that this is the definitive book, or anything close to it on the spiritual disciplines . . . Think of it as an introduction or orientation . . .”<sup>83</sup> “In particular,” he adds, “I am eager to help Christians young and old simplify their approach to their various personal habits of grace, or spiritual disciplines, by highlighting the three key principles of ongoing grace: hearing God’s voice (his word), having his ear (prayer), and belonging to his body (fellowship).”<sup>84</sup> He goes on to say that he hopes that his readers will then move on to read some of the larger books on these subjects, after digesting his shorter, simpler work for beginners. His book is a fresh addition to an old discussion and is therefore quite welcome.

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<sup>82</sup> Mathis, 26. In a footnote, Mathis cites Acts 2:42 as the ground for this – the early Church devoted themselves to these three areas, as well as to “the breaking of the bread.”

<sup>83</sup> Mathis, 15.

<sup>84</sup> Mathis, 15.

**Adele Ahlberg Calhoun:**

One final work to be considered here is also a rather new addition to the conversation: Adele Ahlberg Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform Us*. While the original edition to this work was published in 2005, it has since been revised and expanded for a tenth anniversary edition in 2015. As the title suggests, this is less a work of rigorous theology like Willard's *Spirit of the Disciplines* and more a practical workbook for believers who wish to grow in discipleship. Calhoun even notes that this is not a book to be read from cover to cover, but rather more a "compass that gives you your bearings."<sup>85</sup>

What is perhaps most noteworthy about this work is the sheer number of disciplines included in it – Calhoun examines no fewer than seventy-five practices, organized in seven different categories: worship, opening one's self to God, relinquishing the false self, sharing one's life with others, hearing God's Word, incarnating the love of Christ, and prayer. Certainly, not all of these disciplines are appropriate for all believers. Most Western Christians will have no truck with the Discipline of Iconography, and more traditional believers will shy away from Labyrinth Prayer. Those who prefer to practice the habits that Jesus himself practiced, which, again, are the focus of this thesis-project, would be hard-pressed to justify disciplines such as these. Nevertheless, Calhoun's thorough list of disciplines does offer a wide variety of options, each with a corresponding desire that each particular discipline fulfills.

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<sup>85</sup> Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*. Revised and Expanded Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 23.

This is perhaps Calhoun's greatest strength: she starts with a basic question: what do you want Jesus to do for you?<sup>86</sup> Noting that the Lord often asked this question ("What is it you want?" – Matthew 20:21; "Do you want to get well?" – John 5:6), Calhoun wisely notes that "Jesus knew you wouldn't get well if you didn't *want* the responsibility that came with the wellness."<sup>87</sup> Our desires, she writes, can be open doors for a relationship with God, when those desires are channeled into a disciplined seeking of God.<sup>88</sup> Those who, for example, desire to "free (themselves) from the addiction to and distraction of noise so (they) can be total present to the Lord, (or) to open (themselves) to God in the place beyond words" can practice the discipline of silence.<sup>89</sup> Others who wish "to honor and adore the Trinity as the supreme treasure of life" can instead practice the discipline of worship.<sup>90</sup> Calhoun provides helpful charts and practices for her readers as they discern how God may be leading them into a disciplined life. Each discipline is given its own few pages of teaching, as well as some reflection questions to ponder, some spiritual exercises to practice, and some further resources to explore. With Ortberg, Whitney, and Mathis, Calhoun has offered a practical, down-to-earth resource to help God's people better use these tools for training in godliness.

### **Conclusion:**

As noted earlier, this is by no means a complete or thorough survey of all the literature produced on the topic of the spiritual disciplines. Throughout the centuries,

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<sup>86</sup> Calhoun, 17.

<sup>87</sup> Calhoun, 18.

<sup>88</sup> Calhoun, 18-19.

<sup>89</sup> Calhoun, 15.

<sup>90</sup> Calhoun, 16.

many faithful voices in the Church have offered guidance to God's people as they strive for greater sanctification. From Benedict's *Rule*, offered at the collapse of the Western Roman Empire to Adele Ahlberg Calhoun and David Mathis's most recent offerings, leaders in the Church have recognized that God's people are called to intentional, purposeful living. The Lord gives his grace through certain channels; the people of the Lord respond faithfully to receive that grace through certain means and practices. This truth has been taught in many ways, through many organizational systems, to many different types of readers – and yet, the central truth has remained the same. While repackaged in fresh ways, the old idea remains just as potent: these spiritual disciplines are engines for growth in the Christian life. The Church would do well to attend to those who continue to point us to this truth.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PROJECT DESIGN

Eventually, the practitioner must dislodge him- or herself from the works of theology and from the world of the theoretical and must set about designing a vehicle through which his or her flock can actually receive the benefits of these theological reflections. At this point, the practitioner is faced with a key question: what is the best way to do this? Moreover, how can one measure the extent to which these benefits have taken place – or not taken place, as the case may be? It is these questions, and others related to them, that will be taken up in this chapter.

#### **A Preaching Project:**

As mentioned and briefly discussed back in chapter one, once I realized that I wanted to focus again on the spiritual disciplines as the topic of my thesis-project, I also realized that I wanted this to be a preaching project. On the one hand, I had already taught the spiritual disciplines to a portion of my congregation in my first post-residency doctoral project. I did not believe that repeating that experience or tinkering with it to try to improve upon it would be a worthwhile endeavor. Moreover, a classroom setting only reached a small percentage of the congregation – as previously mentioned, the average attendance for those classes was nineteen. While that is an admirable number, particularly in a small church context, it is still only about one fifth of the attendance for a typical Sunday morning at the church. Four out of five people in the congregation did not have the opportunity to benefit from that endeavor. A preaching project simply had the potential to appeal to a broader target audience.

Moreover, a preaching project simply appealed to me personally – something that I knew was important in this endeavor. I like preaching. Preaching is one of the spiritual gifts God has given to me. When I was considering various programs for my Doctor of Ministry degree, I thought long and hard about enrolling in a preaching program. I knew that preaching a series of sermons for my project would be something that I would not only enjoy, but would also, at the very least, do reasonably well. While these may sound like terribly subjective criteria for crafting a thesis-project, the simple truth is that there is a highly subjective and personal element to all of this. In the end, I had to be the one who would actually do it, and if I chose something that did not hold my interest or did not give me at least some measure of joy, that would adversely affect the whole project, and ultimately would rob the congregation of a potential opportunity for learning and growth. I therefore chose to follow both my gut and my brain and sat down to craft a preaching project plan.

The next question I faced, oddly enough, was how long the project should be. While some might expect content to be the next question, the practical side of me recognized that the length of the project would have to inform the content, and not the other way around. On the one hand, as Adele Ahlberg Calhoun so ably demonstrated in her *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, there are scads of disciplines to focus on. If I had chosen to use her book as a guide, I would have overseen a seventy-five week long preaching project! Not only did that not appeal to me (to put it mildly), but I also knew that it would not appeal either to my congregation or to the professors who would have to read this project (again, to put it mildly!) Over my years as a pastor, I have learned that I

tend to get bored in long series; this is not the recipe for a good thesis-project. If the preacher gets bored, the congregation will, as well.

At the same time, a church's preaching calendar is far from elastic. One must navigate around quite a few fixed holy days and seasons when planning sermon series. Because of the peculiarities of my schedule,<sup>1</sup> I knew that these sermons would be preached in the autumn of 2017; this meant that they had to somehow fit in around the necessary sermons for our annual stewardship campaign, the five hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, and then Thanksgiving, Christ the King Sunday, and Advent. I was not keen on interrupting this particular series, or for splitting it into two parts to fit in around any of those fixed points; I believe a series works best when it can build upon itself and maintain momentum. Therefore, I chose to devote the six Sundays from the first Sunday of September through the second Sunday of October to this project, giving me an opportunity for six sermons in that time frame. This seemed, quite frankly, "do-able." Again, while that is perhaps not a recognized academic category, as a practitioner, one must sometimes consider what can actually be done as a guiding factor when choosing what should be done. Besides, I had preached a sermon series of a similar length for my second academic project, and it had been well received.

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<sup>1</sup> While my actual cohort met every February in Charlotte, because of my father's untimely death in January of 2017, I ended up having to fulfill my third residency with another cohort in July of that year at the main campus of Gordon-Conwell Seminary in South Hamilton, MA. This cut nearly six months off of the time I had between my third residency and graduation in spring 2018, which was the goal I was working toward. I therefore knew I would need to preach the series sooner rather than later.



### **Sermon One: September 3, 2017**

I therefore had the length and dates for my preaching project – all I needed to do was to choose the focus of each sermon. I had determined that the first sermon in the series should be an introductory sermon – focusing on the idea of the spiritual disciplines themselves and why they are important rather than focusing on any one particular discipline. I therefore chose 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 and 1 Timothy 4:6-16 as the Scripture passages for this sermon,<sup>2</sup> titling the sermon “Engines for Growth, Training for Godliness.”<sup>3</sup> In this sermon, besides explaining the purpose for the whole series and how it fit into my degree program, I laid out much of the material discussed already in Chapter One of this paper – the malaise which hung over the congregation back in 2014-2015, the frustrations folks had over not being able to find that “something more,” and my desire for the congregation to experience greater vitality. I told them that I believed that the spiritual disciplines were, as the title suggests, engines for growth, and a way to train in godliness. Naturally, therefore, I began the sermon by defining the spiritual disciplines themselves, specifically how a disciple of Jesus is someone who is disciplined.<sup>4</sup> Jesus’ disciples are people who, in response to his great and gracious work here on earth, now pattern their lives according to the discipline he has laid out – in short, that Christians are people who, in grateful response to the good news of salvation, strive intentionally to live

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<sup>2</sup> I explore these particular texts in more depth beginning on page 24.

<sup>3</sup> The full text of these sermons is included in the appendices of this paper beginning on page 150. I realize that having two Scripture readings does not conform to the typical Haddon Robinson “Big Idea” style of preaching which is taught during the preaching portions of this degree program. While I enjoyed learning this style, and certainly saw many benefits to it, employing it would have been a big adjustment for my congregation, who are used to two Scripture readings in worship – one reading serving as an interpretation for the other. I knew that if I expected the congregation to listen to the content of these six sermons, I could not distract them with such a major change, and therefore continued with my normal style.

<sup>4</sup> John Ortberg, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 54.

as Jesus lived and taught. I then briefly laid out the disciplines I had chosen for the series, which are all practices either modeled or taught by Jesus: prayer, the Scripture disciplines, fasting, silence and solitude, and worship and thanksgiving.

I knew, however, that since “discipline” is in many ways a dirty word in our culture, I would need an illustration to help folks accept this concept. Thankfully, Paul also recognized this need, for in both Scripture readings for this sermon, he uses the idea of athletic training to teach the need for spiritual training. I therefore called upon the athlete’s need not just to try hard, but to train if he or she wishes to win the prize. Similarly, and much more akin to my own sports-free experience, a musician must train consistently if he or she wishes to be able to perform well at a concert or recital. Athletes, musicians, and Christians alike all train for the prize – but while Corinthian athletes competed for a perishable laurel crown, and while musicians compete for ephemeral applause, Christians train for an imperishable crown of life (1 Corinthians 9:25). I ended by exhorting the congregation to remember that these disciplines are a means toward an end – not an end in themselves. Believers practice the spiritual disciplines as a means to greater vitality and godliness – as a means to “keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25). I also reinforced the idea of using the reflections journals I had designed and explained how folks can find sermons they may have missed in the series. While I rarely find introductory sermons like this to be particularly satisfying, I knew that this one was absolutely necessary, both to grab the congregation’s attention, and to lay the foundation for the actual discussion of the particular disciplines I wanted to

commend in the following weeks. If nothing else, I believe I accomplished these goals – though, of course, only time would tell.<sup>5</sup>

### **Sermon Two: September 10, 2017**

The second sermon in the series focused on the discipline of prayer – for I knew that I had to tackle the “Big Two” disciplines of prayer and reading Scripture at the beginning of the series, when the congregation’s attention would be at its highest. I also knew I had to begin with disciplines that were familiar to the congregation, as some of the other practices might scare my good Presbyterians away as being too unfamiliar. I therefore chose as my Scripture passages Jesus’ teaching on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:5-13), and James’ teaching on prayer in James 5:13-20, settling on the title “When You Pray . . .”. As one of the important teachings of the series was to practice the disciplines Jesus himself practiced, it seemed to make sense to choose his teaching on prayer; James’s teaching was also one which commended itself, especially its focus on ordinary people being able to pray powerfully like Elijah. After an introduction reminding the congregation about the nature of our sermon series, I began by talking about how the Christian faith is, at its heart, a relationship. The first great commandment – that God’s people are to love him with every bit of their being (Matthew 22:37) – is, in essence, a commandment to have a certain kind of relationship with the Lord, and relationships, by definition, are about communication. Prayer is the way believers

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<sup>5</sup> The eagle-eyed reader may discern that the sermons described here are perhaps not in the strictest sense expository sermons. While I normally do preach in the expository style, for the purposes of this series, I preached more didactic-style sermons, or what some have termed “topical expository preaching.” I use this style sparingly, as I prefer the “let the passage dictate the subject” style over the “let the teaching/doctrinal point direct the choosing of the passage” style, but I recognize that there are times when the latter is appropriate – like for these sermons.

communicate with God; this is why, I consider prayer to be one of the “Big Two” disciplines – i.e., disciplines which all believers must practice. In fact, it is difficult to understand how one could be a Christian in any meaningful sense of that term if he or she did not pray. Being disciplined in prayer means communicating with God in an intentional, deliberate way – and like with any relationship, a commitment to this kind of communication leads to greater vitality and joy. In this way, prayer is a means to greater depth and greater fellowship with God – for how can anyone say he or she loves, trusts, or follows God if they do not spend time with him in prayer?

At this point in the sermon, I talked about the nature of prayer itself – specifically how Jesus taught that prayer is not about trying to impress other people with our words (Matthew 6:5), nor is prayer really about the words themselves (Matthew 6:7-8). God is not more impressed with long, beautifully-written, flowery prayers. Rather, God desires us to spend time in fellowship with him, and to enjoy his presence; the environment of prayer, therefore, does matter, for one’s surroundings can either aid or hinder this fellowship. To illustrate this, I told about the times I have served as a host for various Prayer Vigils held at the church. Many times, I have witnessed people come skeptically, wondering if they can actually pray for an entire half-hour time slot in the vigil. To a person, those folks have emerged thirty minutes later in complete surprise at how wonderful their prayer time was and have marveled at how they could have spent still more time in prayer.

The reason for this, I believe, has to do with preparation – specifically, preparation of the “prayer closet,” to borrow Jesus’ term (Matthew 6:6, KJV). At these prayer vigils, participants set aside time specifically for prayer. They leave behind a

distracting environment, replete with ringing phones and blaring televisions, and enter into a quiet environment. Ideally, they have prepared themselves for this experience; they have gotten into the proper frame of mind for prayer – but even if they have not, they enter into a quiet place where no one will bother them. I always provide sample prayers, books of prayers, prayerful music, and prayer guides or lists. In other words, vigil participants are practicing prayer as a discipline. They are not just flopping down in a chair and expecting magic; they are setting aside time, preparing themselves, and entering into a prayerful space where they can engage with the Lord. This, I exhorted, is what I wish for everyone in the congregation each and every day – an intentional, engaged, private prayer experience with the Lord.

At the same time, I commended this experience in public prayer, as well. After all, Jesus taught us to pray “Our Father,” not “My Father” (Matthew 6:9, ESV). Similarly, James, in his letter, calls upon his readers to seek prayer and anointing from the elders of the Church during times of sickness. I therefore spent some time commending different ministries in the congregation that provide the opportunity for corporate prayer, from our Monday evening prayer time in our chapel to becoming a part of the prayer chain.

I also commended less formal, less planned prayer – to remember that, as God is always with us through the power of the Holy Spirit, that we can, spontaneously, go to the Lord in prayer, just as we communicate spontaneously with our earthly friends and family, while also scheduling time for more in-depth communication and fellowship. I ended this sermon with a comfort and a challenge; I recognized that there probably were frustrated folks in the congregation who had tried to grow in prayer and had failed. They

may have heard this sermon as something other than good news. At the same time, prayer is learned by doing; the only way to grow in prayer is to pray – and to keep praying. Therefore, I wanted to encourage perseverance in prayer without guilt or condemnation, so I reminded folks that it was a good thing to pray about praying – to ask God to help us become better at prayer, and that this would be a request he would delight in. After all, he did promise that our prayers are powerful (James 5:16), and this is good news!

### **Sermon Three: September 17, 2017**

The third sermon focused on the second of the “Big Two” disciplines – reading and meditating upon Scripture.<sup>6</sup> Again, if the Christian faith is truly understood as a relationship, then the practice of the Scripture disciplines is vital for any believer, as it is here that one finds the other half of the communication equation with God. Believers speak to God through prayer, and while God does speak to his people in many ways – through his creation, through private experience, through the wisdom of friends, etc. – nevertheless, the deepest and most profound way God speaks is through his written word.<sup>7</sup> I therefore chose Psalm 119:1-16 and 2 Timothy 3:10-4:8 as my two Scripture passages, and titled the sermon “Storing Up the Word in Our Hearts.” With Psalm 119 being a love poem to Scripture, and with Paul echoing that love and devotion for the

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<sup>6</sup> I wish I could say I thought long and hard about the ordering of these sermons on the “Big Two” disciplines, or that I had a deeply theological reason for my choices. All I can truly say is that, through some unexamined intuition, this is the choice I make. I made the same choice when ordering these disciplines for the summer class on the disciplines which I taught for my first doctoral project in 2015. Perhaps that had some influence on the ordering here.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. XX, edited by John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), I.vi.1-4

word in his instructions to Timothy, those seemed to be good choices for this sermon. I began my unpacking of this idea by citing an “article” I had seen just a few weeks before on the Christian satirical news site *The Babylon Bee*; the article was entitled “Man Sitting Literally Three Feet Away from Bible Asks God to Speak to Him.”<sup>8</sup> After reading excerpts from this “article,” I noted how it simultaneously brought laughter and conviction, as we believers wish to hear from God, but do not intentionally set aside the time to hear from him through the books that are often not sitting very far from us – our Bibles.

After re-introducing the series and the idea of the “Big Two,” I then talked about how, as Christians, we hold the Bible to be inspired, and after noting the link between the words “inspiration” and “respiration,” I talked about how the Church believes that these 66 books are God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16), that they have the breath of life breathed into them in a way no other books do. The best way to get to know God, therefore – and especially, the best way to get to know what God has to say to his people – is to steep one’s self in Scripture, for Scripture reveals his will and character to us in a way that nothing else ever can or will. Believers therefore need to be devoted to the word.

This served as a perfect segue to the first Scripture reading: the first two portions of that Brobdingnagian poem, Psalm 119. This poem is, of course, a love song for the word of God. It is written in the Hebrew acrostic style, meaning that the poem follows the order of the Hebrew alphabet. Each line of the first eight-line stanza begins with a certain letter of that alphabet, and the stanzas follow the Hebrew order of letters. It is a

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<sup>8</sup> The Babylon Bee, 2017, “Man Sitting Literally Three Feet Away From Bible Asks God To Speak To Him,” May 18, 2017, accessed November 11, 2017 at <http://babylonbee.com/news/man-sitting-literally-three-feet-away-bible-asks-god-speak/>.

massive undertaking, requiring a great amount of skill and effort. Only someone truly devoted to God's word would ever have dared it! This devotion is also shown in the content of the psalm; only a true devotee would write "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Psalm 119:103, ESV). Sugar as it is known today did not exist in ancient Israel, as sugar cane and sugar beets are not native to that area. If one wanted to sweeten a dish, besides using fruit, the only alternative was to use honey, which was therefore considered an exquisite treat.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the psalmist writes here that he delights in the word of God in the same way we delight in dessert today – in ice cream, cake, or a chocolate and peanut butter pie! I then wondered aloud if God's people today had this same kind of devotion!

A similar level of devotion is found in the second Scripture reading, which is taken from the Apostle Paul's "swan song," the final letter he wrote in Scripture before dying: 2 Timothy. There, in what may have been Paul's final written words, he commanded his protégé Timothy to "preach the word" (2 Timothy 4:2, ESV). Paul charges Timothy to be ready, both in season and out of season, to preach, teach, and proclaim God's word, whether people want to hear it or not (2 Timothy 4:2-8). What is so striking is that Paul writes this, knowing that his time is short. Again I wondered aloud – if a believer today knew that he or she were going to die, what would that person write about in their final letter? Would that person have this same devotion to Scripture that Paul had? It is a striking point to ponder!

At this point, I recognized that I needed to move to some of the practical applications of this point, for while I figured that most people in the congregation were

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<sup>9</sup> John Eaton, *Psalms for Life: Hearing and Praying the Book of Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 307.



with me thus far, I also knew that a nagging question was probably bothering them: “Yes, but when I read Scripture, I do not understand it!” Like with prayer the previous week, I exhorted the congregation to stick with it all the same, for with the Scriptures as well, the more we “do it,” the more we “get it.” I exhorted the congregation to be faithful in coming to worship to hear the Scriptures proclaimed, and to be faithful in setting aside time each day both to pray and to read Scripture. I also noted that today, God’s people live in a time when there is an embarrassment of riches when it comes to Bible resources; there is an abundance of books, magazines, internet sites, podcasts, radio programs, and television programs available to help us understand the word – the question is: how much does the believer really want to grow and learn? To this end, I exhorted all in the congregation to purchase a Study Bible with notes and other helps, and to choose a Bible reading plan, offering to help any and all with those tasks if needed. I also encouraged the congregation to attend Sunday School and/or the Bible Study I teach each Monday evening. Our church has a variety of ministries available like this which can help our folks learn and grow – but each needs to make the disciplined, intentional effort to take advantage of them!

I ended this sermon by telling a personal story that occurred while I was leading a Bible Study on a college retreat. I do not remember what the lesson was about, but I will never forget when a friend, during the discussion time, pulled a letter out of her Bible and proceeded to tell us about it. The letter had been written by her sister, who had died of cancer not long after it was written. This friend then explained how she read over this letter each day, for she loved her sister very much, and she knew she was never going to get another letter from her. She then said something to the effect of “if I feel this strongly

about a letter written by my sister, how much more should I feel about this book which God has written for me? He also died, but he rose again, and his words have power that my sister's words will never have. That is why I spend time every day reading my Bible." I left the congregation with some questions: do we in our church have this kind of passion for God's word? Are we reading it and studying it in a disciplined, intentional way? Or, like the man in the Babylon Bee "article," are we wishing to know God's will, all while our Bibles sit, closed, three feet away? With this, and with similar exhortations, I closed, the sermon series now halfway done.

#### **Sermon Four: September 24, 2017**

The fourth sermon in the series focused on the discipline of fasting – a discipline that has fallen decidedly out of favor in the Western Church. In fact, Richard Foster archly notes in his *Celebration of Discipline* that while he was doing his research, he could find no books published on the subject of Christian fasting from 1861-1954!<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, if one goes back to earlier Church history, fasting was simply a way of life for believers. In fact, it seems that in earlier centuries of the Church, the "Big Two" disciplines were really the "Big Three."

I therefore knew I needed to preach on fasting, as unpopular as it might be. I chose as my Scripture passages the story of Esther's fasting and prayer in Esther 4:1-17, and Jesus' time of fasting and temptation in the wilderness as told in Matthew 4:1-11; I titled the sermon "Disciplining Our Appetites." Again, using Jesus's own example of fasting seemed to strengthen the idea of God's people today doing the things Jesus did,

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 47.

while using Esther not only helped to give some balance to the choice of Old and New Testament passages, but also gave an excellent story for the congregation to be immersed in. I find that often the narrative passages of Scripture are easier to preach, and that they help to ground the sermon's points in history. After acknowledging that fasting had become the "ugly step-child" of the spiritual disciplines in the Church, and noting the push-back I had received when teaching on fasting during my first doctoral project, I reminded the congregation that the goal of all believers should be to have a deeper, more vital relationship with the Lord – and that believers should then be willing to take advantage of any and all tools which can help toward that goal.

The sermon then began with a discussion of what fasting actually is: abstaining from something, traditionally food, for a period of time as a spiritual exercise.<sup>11</sup> I then discussed all the different kinds of fasts that one can practice, including partial fasts (such as the "Daniel fast"), electronic fasts, seasonal fasts, and corporate fasts. I also discussed Biblical examples of fasting, from the Yom Kippur fast commanded by God in Leviticus 16 to the myriad of people throughout Scripture who are said to have practiced the discipline. I also gave some examples from Church history of people who fasted, including Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Wesley, the last of whom actually refused to ordain anyone for ministry in the Methodist Church unless that person fasted twice a week.<sup>12</sup> After this barrage of information, intended to show overwhelming evidence from the Bible and Church history of the validity and usefulness of this discipline, I then remarked on the irony that today, when we in the West have so much

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<sup>11</sup> Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), 160.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Foster, 48, 51.

more of everything, we are far less apt to fast than in days when people had so little. I then launched into a discussion of what fasting is not.

First of all, fasting is not a diet program, even though today, when so many folks are trying to shed a bit of *avoirdupois*, that seems to be the first thing that comes to mind when talking about this discipline. Author Donald Whitney, however, notes that if believers fast simply to lose weight, they will simply have a miserable, self-centered experience.<sup>13</sup> That is surely not the goal of any spiritual discipline. Secondly, fasting is not a way to please God, or for one to get him to do what he or she wants him to do. Fasting is not a hunger strike against God!<sup>14</sup> For one thing, our God is not the kind of God whom believers need to try to impress, as he has already demonstrated his love and care for his people through his son, Jesus Christ, especially through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Similarly, our God is not the kind of God who can be manipulated by his people, or whom believers can put over the proverbial barrel to force blessings out of him. Fasting is not about any of these things.

Rather, fasting is first and foremost an aid to prayer. The text I chose from the book of Esther demonstrates this best. Esther 4 is where the crisis of that particular story has come to a head. The evil Haman has duped King Xerxes into naively signing a death warrant for all the Jews in the Persian Empire. Mordecai, Esther's cousin, and the person who raised her, sits mourning at the gate of the palace. When Esther, who by this point has become the Queen of Persia, sees her loved one in such grief, she sends one of her attendants to him to investigate the cause. In a series of back-and-forth messages, Mordecai relates to Esther the events which have put her people into jeopardy; he also

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<sup>13</sup> Whitney, 165.

<sup>14</sup> Whitney, 165; Foster, 48-49.

implores her to intervene on their behalf, saying “. . . who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14b, ESV). Esther replies by reminding Mordecai that one simply did not saunter into the presence of King Xerxes without an invitation – to do so would mean death, unless the King extended his golden scepter, effectively pardoning the offender’s impertinence and lifting the sentence of death that normally went with it. Esther, however, had not been sent for by her husband for over a month. When Mordecai remains adamant, Esther finally acquiesces – but first, she says this: “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” (Esther 4:16, ESV). It is incredibly instructive that before making this hugely important decision, Esther not only fasts and prays, but calls upon her community to do the same on her behalf. From the rest of the book, it is clear to see that this strengthening discipline bore great fruit – the good guys win, and the bad guys lose!

The same pattern holds in the second Scripture reading: Jesus, after his baptism, is led by the Holy Spirit into the desert for forty days of fasting and praying. While this naturally weakens him physically, it nevertheless strengthens him spiritually so that he can face Satan’s three temptations (See Matthew 4:1-11).<sup>15</sup> In the same way, God’s people today fast and pray as a way to be strengthened spiritually, and to seek the Lord. Believers fast and pray in times of crisis and distress, and when seeking God’s will for a major decision – and for a variety of other reasons, as well. In so doing, they are confronted with the things that control them each day; as Richard Foster writes,

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<sup>15</sup> Willard, 166.

“whatever in our lives is producing an addiction in us is a prime area for fasting. In this way we are learning to depend upon God alone.”<sup>16</sup> In fasting, the believer directly combats those addictive things, and the other underlying issues that God wants to deal with, such as anger, anxiety, and fear. Purposefully depriving one’s self is actually a choice for freedom; denying one’s self is actually a core component to following Jesus (see Matthew 16:24). In fasting, the believer learns, as Jesus says, that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4, quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3).

At this point, I realized that again, I might have persuaded some in the congregation, but that some niggling practical problems still remained. I faced the “Well, I get it – but I do not think I can do it,” or the worse “Well, I get it, but I do not think I want to do it!” conundrum. I therefore reminded the congregation that, while those with conditions such as diabetes or heart disease should, of course, consult with a doctor before practicing any rigorous kind of fasting, nevertheless, all of God’s children, no matter the medical condition, can practice some kind of fasting. Everyone can at least do a partial fast, missing at the very least, one meal – for doctors today require a twelve to fourteen hour fast before doing blood work. It is therefore possible. “Daniel fasts,” which allow the believer to consume fruits and vegetables, and electronic fasts, where one fasts from technology such as computers, televisions, and smart phones, are also accessible to everyone. Still, while commending this to the congregation, I was sure to stress that the why of the fast is what really matters. Fasting is a tool for God’s people – a means to an end. Fasting is a means to strengthen prayer, and to combat the things that

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Foster, “Understanding Fasting.” In Nathan Foster, *The Marking of an Ordinary Saint: My Journey From Frustration to Joy with the Spiritual Disciplines*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), 35.

get in the way of one's relationship with God. Fasting is an engine for growth, and a means to godliness – but only when it is practiced for this purpose. With this reminder, I wrapped up the sermon, hoping that the message had been heard and received.

### **Sermon Five: October 1, 2017**

The penultimate sermon focused on the twin disciplines of solitude and silence. While I could have chosen any number of disciplines to fill this fifth slot in the series, I knew that these were two disciplines which are sorely needed in today's noisy, hectic world. God's people today do, after all, live in a world when advertisements play even at the gas pump! I therefore chose Psalm 62:1-12 and Mark 1:35-39 as my Scripture passages, titling this sermon "Be Still, My Soul." Again, choosing a passage which showed Jesus practicing these disciplines was a no-brainer, while the passage from the Psalms seemed to suggest itself both by its poetic elements, which could be repeated to great effect, but by offering up David's story as an anchor to the lessons of the sermon. With this, I again realized that I had chosen disciplines which went hand-in-hand with the disciplines of prayer and reading Scripture; like with fasting, the disciplines of solitude and silence enable believers to better practice the "Big Two." I began the sermon by noting this, again emphasizing that the way to deeper fellowship with God, and to greater vitality in the congregation is through intentional, disciplined prayer and study of Scripture – and that sometimes, the best way to do these things is to retreat from the busyness and hustle of the world to spend time in solitude and silence with God.

For again, this is something that our Lord Jesus himself did. In the passage from Mark 1, Jesus retreats from the world for a time after his initial burst of popularity. Mark

tells of the calling of the first disciples, the deliverance of a man possessed by a demon, and the healing of Simon Peter's mother-in-law, and naturally, word of this spreads like wildfire. Jesus becomes the "next big thing"; everyone wants a piece of him. In today's world, Jesus would have had all kinds of folks coming out of the woodwork to offer to represent him, to manage his online presence and his "branding" opportunities. Believers today can only imagine how excited the disciples were by their master's sudden success. Jesus, however, ". . . rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed." (Mark 1:35, ESV). This is by no means the only time we find Jesus doing this; in fact, if one compiles all the instances of Jesus withdrawing to be quiet and alone, it is clear these were holy habits or disciplines that he practiced. He drew strength from being alone and quiet with his Father in heaven.

The same is clearly seen in the other reading chosen for this sermon: Psalm 62. It is clear from reading this psalm that David is under a great deal of stress; his enemies are attacking him, and trying to get rid of him. No accompanying superscription is attached to this psalm, however, to name for the reader which particular incident prompted the writing of this psalm. Here, however, David tells us how he dealt with the various kinds of stress and persecution he experienced:

For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence,  
for my hope is from him.  
He only is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.  
On God rests my salvation and my glory;  
my mighty rock, my refuge is God. (Psalm 62:5-7, ESV)

Here, David is practicing what I like to call "self-talk." He is actually preaching the Gospel to himself – a skill all believers must learn to develop. In the midst of his stress and pain, David withdraws to a quiet place and reminds himself of what is still true: that



his hope is still in God, that God is still his rock and salvation, that his salvation and glory rest on God alone. David, in other words, withdraws to solitude and silence so he can “be still and know that (God is) God” (Psalm 46:10, ESV). That is often a truth the believer can only know upon withdrawing to a quiet, solitary place.

At this point, I moved into the more practical aspects of the practice of these disciplines, and I began by noting that these times of solitude and silence can be practiced in both planned and spontaneous ways. There are times, during the course of a busy, stressful day, when the believer must withdraw to a quiet corner, or must close his or her office door, and simply spend five or ten minutes in quiet and solitude with the Lord to again know that he is God. Susanna Wesley, mother of nineteen children, including John and Charles Wesley, famously threw her apron over her head when she needed some quiet, alone time with the Lord to read her Bible and pray;<sup>17</sup> her children apparently knew that this was a time that their Mom needed some time with Jesus!

These times of solitude and silence, however, sometimes must also be planned. I noted at this point how a pastor friend of mine would occasionally go on a monastic retreat at a Roman Catholic convent in the Cincinnati area. “When we quiet our mouths and computers and phones,” she wrote to me, “we can hear the voice of God so much more clearly.”<sup>18</sup> Naturally, not every believer is able to take quite such a thorough retreat into solitude and silence for days at a time, but most all believers are able to take a planned hike in the woods, or a planned quiet drive in the car. Most believers, with some effort, can be intentional about stilling and quieting their souls to rest in the Lord, and to know that he is God.

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<sup>17</sup> Whitney, 198.

<sup>18</sup> Anne E. Horton, Private Facebook Message with the Author, September 25, 2017.

Again, as with the previous sermons, in the final portion of the message, I addressed some objections that I knew were bubbling up in the minds of the congregation. I knew that most all the extroverts in the room were probably on the verge of a proverbial nervous breakdown at the thought of being quiet and alone for any period of time. Most everyone else was frantically flipping through their calendars in the minds, wondering when on earth they were going to find any time to be quiet and alone with the Lord. To both, I simply pointed out that Jesus was the most important man who ever lived. The relative busyness and importance of today's believers pales in comparison to his own. Nevertheless, he managed to find time to withdraw to lonely places to be quiet and alone with his Heavenly Father – so what excuse could any believer present for not practicing these incredibly important disciplines? If a believer is too busy to be quiet and alone with the Lord, then that believer is simply too busy, full stop! Busyness, hurry, and noise are all enemies of the Christian life.<sup>19</sup>

With this, it is clear that anyone who breaks into a cold sweat at the thought of spending any amount of time in solitude or silence is a prime candidate for learning to practice these disciplines. I urged those who lived with constant noise – with the television always on in the background, or the radio constantly playing – to seriously think of finding a way to be alone and quiet with the Lord in a disciplined way. Yes, I said, this will be frightening and uncomfortable, but the answer is not to run away, but to push through the fear. After all, as Donald Whitney writes:

Without exception, the men and women I have known who make the most rapid, consistent, and evident growth in Christlikeness have been those who develop a daily time of being alone with God. This time of outward silence is the time of

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<sup>19</sup> Martyred missionary Jim Elliot wrote that “. . . the devil has made it his business to monopolize on the three elements: noise, hurry, crowds . . . Satan is quite aware of the power of silence.” Quoted in Whitney, 196.

daily Bible intake and prayer. In this solitude is the occasion for private worship.<sup>20</sup>

There is no substitute for spending quiet, solitary time with the Lord. No gimmick, no quick fix can take the place of consistent, intentional quality time with him. Believers must therefore make it their priority to practice these disciplines – for the purpose of godliness.

### **Sermon Six: October 8, 2017**

The final sermon in the series focused on the disciplines of worship and thanksgiving. I thought it appropriate that the series end on a “high note,” as it were. Human beings were, after all, created to worship the Lord, and to enjoy him forever.<sup>21</sup> Since the Fall, however, humanity’s default setting has no longer been one of worship and thanksgiving, but rather of grumbling and complaining. I therefore chose as Scriptures for this final sermon Numbers 14:1-35 and Romans 8:18-30, and titled the sermon “Praise God, From Whom All Blessings Flow.” I had initially meant to use two passages from the Psalms for this sermon, but found myself drawn in mid-preparation to these passages instead. On the one hand, I felt it important to contrast thanksgiving and worship with complaining – and what better passage for that than the story from Numbers? In addition, I kept finding myself wanting to add in the “Yes, but . . .” portions of Paul’s Romans 8 teaching – i.e., Yes, you may be suffering, but still you must worship and give thanks, for consider the believer’s future hope, and consider the

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<sup>20</sup> Whitney, 195.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Tuckney, et. al., “The Westminster Larger Catechism.” In *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, part 1, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 1996), Q.1.

greatness of God and how he can use your suffering for glory. I do not often change Scripture passages mid-stream like this, but in this case, it proved to be a wise choice.

I began the sermon by re-telling the story from the Numbers passage, in which the Children of Israel, after a year-and-a-half of travelling in the wilderness, finally reach the border of the Promised Land. The spies they have sent out to survey the land come back with a majority report and a minority report; the minority report, from Caleb and Joshua, said essentially “We can do this! God is with us! Let’s go!” (Numbers 13:30). The other ten spies, however, quaked in their sandals, terrified of the Amalekites, Canaanites, and giants they had seen, next to whom they felt like grasshoppers (Numbers 13:28-29). The people, then, rather than remembering all the miracles they had seen from the Lord in the past eighteen months, and rather than going to the Lord in worship and praise, instead have a meltdown, and nearly stone Moses, Aaron, and Joshua for suggesting that they obey and enter the Promised Land. In spite of all they had seen, the people had no joy in the Lord; they had come out of Egypt, but Egypt was still in their hearts, and to Egypt – and to slavery – they wished to return, rather than worshiping and obeying their Redeemer Lord.

Sadly, many in the Church today suffer from the same sins as the Children of Israel. Years ago, I remember someone talking about the “Back to Egypt Committee” in their congregation, and I have since come to realize that nearly every congregation comes equipped with one.<sup>22</sup> In every congregation, it seems, there is a group who would rather sit on the sidelines and grumble, critique, criticize, and talk about how things were so much better in the past. The majority of pastors I have talked with say at some point that

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<sup>22</sup> I sadly cannot remember who it is that coined this term, but I have since made it my own.

this is one of their biggest discouragements, and often is one of the biggest factors holding a congregation back from flourishing. In this story, God teaches us that this spirit of criticism and complaining actually leads to death – for complaining and backbiting is the opposite of thanksgiving. A complainer dares to look God in the eye and tell him that he is doing a lousy job; a complainer is essentially saying to God “I can do your job better than you can.”

This attitude, of course, can only lead to death, for God is the source of all life, and the complainer has set himself or herself up over against God. When a believer refuses to bow before God, or to submit to him in joyful, thankful obedience, it leads only to bitterness and worthlessness. This is what happens to the Children of Israel – because they refuse to go to the Promised Land, and because God loves them enough to keep them from going back to Egypt, they in effect have nowhere to go, and so they wander in the wilderness for thirty-eight and a half more years, until every last one of them except Caleb and Joshua have died. God forgave his people, but because of their complaining, they missed out on the joy he had prepared for them. Too often, God’s people today suffer the same fate.

At this point, I suggested that one of the key ways to avoid this fate is through the intentional, purposeful practice of the disciplines of worship and thanksgiving. Taking intentional delight in the Lord is an excellent way to combat humanity’s natural tendency to grumble and complain. I was sure to note that these disciplines are not the same as simply pretending that things are good when they really are not. This is so much more than the “turn your frown upside-down” sentimentality that can be found emblazoned upon tacky trinkets in so many Christian book stores. God never calls his people to lie,

or to pretend. Rather, in the mist of pain and frustration, God's people are called still to give thanks, and to remember two truths spelled out by the Apostle Paul: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us . . . And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:18, 28, ESV). Paul's first statement reminds believers that no matter how difficult things may be here on earth, what his people have to look forward to in the new heavens and new earth is so incredibly wonderful, so incredibly good, that today's sufferings will pale in comparison. His second statement teaches his readers that again, no matter how difficult things may be here on earth, the Lord is so powerful, and the Lord is so good, that he is able – and indeed, willing – to bring good out of that evil and difficulty – indeed, that God will redeem and transform his people's suffering and pain. This means that, in light of the three major hurricanes that hit the United States during the fall of 2017, and in light of the several mass shootings that also took place during this season, nevertheless, Christians are still able, and indeed still commanded, to give thanks, and to praise the Lord – for the Lord is still good! This is not a naïve worship, but rather a deeply profound worship; this is worship which recognizes that God's worthiness and goodness is stronger and more fundamental than any wickedness his people may suffer here and now.

Therefore, this worship must be a disciplined part of one's everyday life, for every day, God is good. Naturally, as a pastor, I could not resist giving a pitch for regular attendance at worship on Sunday morning. I even told a story from my own childhood – the only time I ever remember trying to weasel my way out of going to church. I

remember my mother standing in my bedroom doorway, asking “Why? Did God not bless you this week? Do you not need to thank him for being with you this week?” That lesson I learned as a teenager is still true today: every week, and indeed every day, God’s people are called to worship and to give thanks. Every week, and every day, God’s people are called to affirm his goodness, and to enjoy his presence. Even on the worst days, there are blessings to count and to give thanks for. It is a principle so simple that it can sound simplistic – and yet, it is a principle that will transform a believer, and combat the tendency toward complaining and bitterness.

I illustrated this principle with a story from Corrie ten Boom’s autobiography *The Hiding Place*. In the story, Corrie and her sister Betsie have been arrested by the Nazis occupying the Netherlands for aiding Dutch Jews; eventually, the sisters are sent to the Ravensbruck women’s concentration camp in Germany, where they faced appalling conditions. There, the sisters still strove to exercise their faith. By a set of incredible miracles, they had managed to keep hold of a tiny Bible which they used to conduct worship services and Bible studies in their barracks, which had come to be known as “the crazy place where people have hope.”<sup>23</sup> One day, however, Corrie reached her tipping point. As she crawled into bed, which was no more than a wooden platform covered with filthy straw, she felt a series of little pinches on her legs. She sat up straight in bed, realizing exactly what was happening: she was being bitten by fleas! In the midst of bitter complaints to her sister about the wretched circumstances of their lives, however, Betsie reminded Corrie that God had commanded them to “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:18), a Scripture passage they had read together that

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<sup>23</sup> Corrie ten Boom and Jamie Buckingham, *Tramp for the Lord*, in *Corrie Ten Boom: Her Story: The Hiding Place, Tramp for the Lord, Jesus is Victor* (New York, International Press, 1995), 191.

very day. Betsie then began to lead her sister in a prayer of thanksgiving; she gave thanks for their being assigned together to the same barracks, for the overcrowding of those barracks, which enabled them to reach more people for Jesus, and then finally, for the fleas. At that point, however, Corrie rebelled. She simply could not give thanks for fleas. In the end, however, Betsie learned that it was those fleas which kept the concentration camp guards from doing their usual terrorizing checks on Barracks 28, and which enabled Corrie and Betsie to carry on their ministry of Bible Study and worship in the name of the Lord.<sup>24</sup> Betsie knew what Corrie did not: that God's people are to give thanks in all circumstances – even for fleas!<sup>25</sup>

I closed my sermon by asking a question my mother had asked during a phone call the previous week: what if the congregation were to wake up tomorrow, and all that we had were the things we had given thanks to God for?<sup>26</sup> I then pointed to the deeper question underneath that one: are we at First Presbyterian Church of Harrison, Ohio, truly thankful people who worship God and give thanks as a way of life, or do we only do so on special occasions? When the fleas come, do we give thanks for them? Do we anticipate how God is going to bring good out of them, or do we grumble, whine, complain, and in general, have the arrogance to critique the life God has given? I concluded by again reminding the congregation that the way to greater vitality and growth in the Lord is to be intentional about practicing the spiritual disciplines – in this

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<sup>24</sup> Corrie Ten Boom, with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1971), 197-199, 208-209.

<sup>25</sup> Later that very week, after I had complained about something on my Facebook page, one of my parishioners responded by reminding me to “give thanks for the fleas.” It was at this point that I rejoiced, for I knew that people were listening!

<sup>26</sup> Linda Long, Private Phone Conversation with the Author, October 2017.



case, specifically the disciplines of worship and thanksgiving. For no matter what, the Lord is good, and his steadfast love endures forever (Psalm 100:5, ESV).

### **The Reflection Journals:**

With the sermon series over, it now came down to me to wait for the congregation to return the Reflection Journals I had written for them.<sup>27</sup> As discussed in Chapter One, in lieu of face-to-face interviews or focus groups, I settled on designing a document for the congregation to use throughout the sermon series which would track their reactions to the sermons themselves, and which hopefully would demonstrate some measure of spiritual growth through the process. These Reflection Journals were distributed at the beginning of the sermon series and were available to the congregation every week thereafter.

The journals included a set of questions to be answered at the beginning of the series which included age, gender, how long the participant has been associated with the church, whether or not the participant had taken part in my first doctoral project (the summer class on the spiritual disciplines), a question asking the participant to rank their spiritual life on a scale of one to ten, and a chart in which the participant could indicate which spiritual disciplines he or she already practiced and how often. There was also a question asking the participant to indicate how he or she hoped to benefit from this project. Some of these questions were duplicated in the questionnaire at the end of the journal – specifically the question about the vibrancy of the participant’s spiritual life, and one measuring the changes made to the practice of the spiritual discipline. On this

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<sup>27</sup> A sample Reflection Journal is included in the appendices beginning on page 139.

Post-Project Question sheet, I also asked if the participant had any big “take-away” from the project, and whether he or she believed our congregation should continue to explore the disciplines and how. In between these questionnaires were pages designed to correspond with each sermon, each with three or four questions designed to measure if the participant had “gotten” some of the key points of that sermon. In the documents for the final five sermons, questions were specifically included to ask if and how those particular disciplines were currently being practiced in the participant’s life, and what one step the participant would take to grow in that discipline that particular week. Of course, in compliance with the Gordon-Conwell policy on research, a cover letter was included with each Reflection Journal, not only explaining the project, but also giving assurances that all answers would be kept strictly anonymous – that no one would ever know who wrote what, a promise more easily kept in that nowhere on the journals did I ever ask the participant to give his or her name.

Finally, I did my utmost throughout the whole project to make the congregation’s portion as convenient as possible. Of course, a key component to this project is the effort folks in the congregation have put forth to listen to these sermons, and to fill out the Reflection Journals, but I wanted to do all that I could to make that as easy as possible for them. I did not want anything to stand in the way of someone participating. To this end, I made sure to explain during the announcement time at each worship service that the congregation were in the midst of a sermon series which was the backbone of my doctoral project, and to explain about my need for the congregation’s participation. Reflection Journals were passed out with the bulletins on the first Sunday of the series, and were available for pick-up on each Sunday afterwards; they were also available for

pick-up in the church office all throughout the series, and even afterwards.<sup>28</sup> All of First Presbyterian's worship services are live-streamed online, thereby making it possible for someone who cannot come to worship to still participate, and all of the worship services are available upon request in DVD format. In addition, my sermons are all posted on our church's YouTube channel, enabling congregants to "catch up" later if they missed a Sunday or two.<sup>29</sup> In short, every provision was made to enable as many people as possible in the congregation to participate in the project if they chose.

In the end, a project that I had thought was perhaps too simple ended up being an enormous amount of work. Of course, like with most any pastor, I look back and wish I could change something here or there, or to preach a sermon better than I did. Still, with the time, resources, and energy I had available, I gave the best I could give in the design and implementation of this thesis-project. It now rested in the hands of the congregation, and in the hands of God to see whether it made any difference in the life of the church. In the final chapter, I will analyze the information I received back via the Reflection Journals, and will hopefully be able to answer that question.

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<sup>28</sup> The last journals were given out in mid-November of 2017.

<sup>29</sup> If you would like to access the church's YouTube channel, go to [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCr\\_A4d3L-GAEF8ymxJF\\_8Zg/videos?sort=dd&shelf\\_id=0&view=0](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCr_A4d3L-GAEF8ymxJF_8Zg/videos?sort=dd&shelf_id=0&view=0), or simply type "First Presbyterian Church Harrison Ohio" into YouTube's search bar.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### OUTCOMES

As the old proverb goes, “the proof of the pudding is in the eating.” While my thesis-project had not focused on desserts of any kind, the sentiment of the statement still stood. The proof of this sermon series would only be found in the congregation’s feedback. I had spent six weeks commending a greater intentionality in the faith through these very old spiritual disciplines, but I would only know if that had made any difference at all through the information that the congregation itself had given back to me via the Reflection Journals I had designed. Before I dig into these, however, I believe it is important to look at a few statistics.

First, while it never does for a pastor to fixate exclusively upon the attendance figures for his or her church, nevertheless for the purposes of this project, attendance is important, as it indicates how many people had an opportunity to hear these sermons first-hand. This information is found in the Figure One below:

FIGURE ONE: WORSHIP ATTENDANCE <sup>1</sup>				
<u>Date:</u>	<u>Discipline(s):</u>	<u>8:30 Service:</u>	<u>10:45 Service:</u>	<u>Total:</u>
9/3/17	Intro	10	80	90
9/10/17	Prayer	19	84	103
9/17/17	Scripture	17	84	101
9/24/17	Fasting	15	82	97
10/1/17	Silence & Solitude	17	84	101
10/8/17	Worship & Thanksgiving	14	87	101

<sup>1</sup> These are the official attendance figures as given to the church administrative assistant each week. I provide the 8:30 worship totals, while each week’s head usher provides the information for the 10:45 worship service.

Added to this are the figures of those who did not attend the service in person, but who watched the service via our live-stream service on the internet:

FIGURE TWO: LIVE-STREAM FIGURES:<sup>2</sup>

9/3/17:	7
9/10/17:	6
9/17/17:	9
9/24/17:	7
10/1/17:	13
10/8/17:	6

In addition, the church's sermons are able to be viewed via a special YouTube channel, which provides information regarding the number of times a particular sermon video has been viewed. Below, in Figure Three, are those statistics:

FIGURE THREE: YOUTUBE FIGURES:<sup>3</sup>

9/3/17:	50
9/10/17:	22
9/17/17:	15
9/24/17:	10
10/1/17:	15
10/8/17:	9

If we put these figures together, we find the total "hearings" or "viewings" for each sermon is as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Steuver, Private E-mail with the Author. October 10, 2017. Tom is an elder in the congregation and oversees its internet ministries. One is able to watch the service live via the church website at <http://www.harrisonpresbyterian.com/worship-services/service-live-webcast>.

<sup>3</sup> "First Presbyterian Church, Harrison, Ohio." YouTube Channel. Accessed December 19, 2017 at [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCr\\_A4d3L-GAEF8ymxJF\\_8Zg/featured](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCr_A4d3L-GAEF8ymxJF_8Zg/featured).

**FIGURE FOUR: SERMON HEARING/VIEWING TOTALS:**

9/3/17:	147
9/10/17:	131
9/17/17:	125
9/24/17:	114
10/1/17:	129
10/8/17:	116

It should, of course, be noted that this does not mean that 147 different people heard or viewed the sermon on September 3; it is entirely possible – and perhaps probable – that some of that figure represents multiple viewings by some individuals.

Along with this, it is important to note the number of people who had an opportunity to fill out one of the Reflection Journals designed for this series. The church office prepared one hundred copies of these journals to be distributed to the congregation. On the first week of the series, they were handed out to each attendee along with their church bulletin. In the weeks thereafter, the journals were available with the bulletins and were commended from the pulpit, but were not necessarily physically put into each attendee's hands. All told, eighty-seven of these journals were taken over the six-week period. Again, this does not mean that eighty-seven discrete individuals took journals, as two different parishioners communicated to me that they had taken more than one journal, having lost or misplaced one previously. Nevertheless, for the purposes of clarity, I am sticking with the eighty-seven number for number of journals handed out. In the end, twenty-three Reflections Journals were handed in to me, giving a return rate of 26.4%. I am grateful to all who took their time to give their feedback on this series.

## **Initial Information**

All told, if one looks at the information provided in the opening questions of these Reflection Journals, those twenty-three respondents were made up of sixteen women and seven men. The average age of the respondents was seventy-two, with the oldest respondent being ninety-one, and the youngest being forty-eight. The average length of time a respondent had been connected with the congregation was just over twenty-six years, with the longest tenure being eighty years, and the shortest being just one year.<sup>4</sup> Five of the respondents indicated that they had participated in the summer class on the spiritual disciplines that I taught in 2015 for my first Doctor of Ministry project, while sixteen indicated that they had not; two responded with a “maybe.” When asked in this opening section whether or not they had read about or studied the spiritual disciplines in other settings, eight indicated that they had, while ten said they had not. Two respondents were on the fence, indicating that were not sure if they had or not. Three did not respond at all. Clearly, the spiritual disciplines were not a particularly familiar topic for those in the congregation.

Also in this opening section of the Reflection Journal, respondents were asked to rate the vibrancy of their spiritual life on a scale of one to ten, with one being the worst and ten being the best. I recognized when I crafted this question that the results would be somewhat ambiguous, as it would be up to each respondent individually to determine the criteria for spiritual vibrancy; nevertheless, I thought it would be helpful to see how these individuals evaluated their faith. The average answer was a 6.69, with the lowest answer

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<sup>4</sup> These figures are based only on twenty-two answers, as one respondent failed to answer this question.

being a three, and the highest an eight.<sup>5</sup> Respondents were given space to indicate why they chose the number they did;<sup>6</sup> some were very hopeful, such as the woman who rated herself a seven, and wrote “Throughout the past 10 years my spiritual life has improved and because of more free time, has come alive, put into practice in my every day life. Though my love for Jesus has been strong for the past 30 years, it has become stronger and practiced, reflected toward improvement in prayer and Scripture.”<sup>7</sup> Others were less so, such as the woman who rated her spiritual life as a three, and who wrote “not vibrant, kind of ‘flabby.’ There are lots of ups + downs depending on what is happening in my life.”<sup>8</sup> By and large, even those who rated themselves higher on the scale noted their general inconsistency and/or lack of effort; most all recognized their need to improve.

Toward the end of the Initial Information section of the Journals, I asked the respondents to tell me about the specific spiritual disciplines they practiced regularly, and how often they practiced them. To help the respondents, I included a small chart listing the seven disciplines featured in this series. Interestingly, all twenty-three respondents indicated they prayed, while twenty-two each indicated they practiced the disciplines of worship and thanksgiving. Twenty said they practiced the study of Scripture, and fourteen each indicated they practiced the disciplines of silence and solitude. Least popular was the discipline of fasting; only three respondents indicated they practiced this

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<sup>5</sup> These figures involved a bit of adjustment, as several respondents gave answers like “3-4,” or “8-9,” while another wrote “7+.” When a respondent gave two numbers, I chose the lower number; for the “7+” answer, I simply recorded it as a seven.

<sup>6</sup> When quoting from the Reflection Journals, I tried my best to reproduce the comments as written. I did not fix any grammar or spelling errors. While I will not use “(sic)” for every error, I will do so for errors that might be considered distracting to the reader.

<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this project, I assigned each Reflection Journal a number. This helped me track each respondent’s answers through the six-week project; it also helps to protect each respondent’s anonymity for the purposes of citation. This comment was written by Respondent Three, Reflection Journal. Initial Information. September – October 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Respondent Nine, Reflection Journal. Initial Information. September – October 2017.



regularly. I also gave room for the participants to indicate other disciplines they practiced regularly; I received a diverse list of practices, including reflecting, giving, and journaling. One individual even indicated that she had written a 250-page book of ten religious short stories which had not been published.<sup>9</sup> The general length of this respondent's answers in general indicated that she enjoyed writing, and that she thought deeply about the matters involved.

While most pastors would be overjoyed at such high marks of participation in these spiritual disciplines among those in their congregation, the information regarding the frequency of these practices told a different story. While I would tend to think "regular practice" would lean more toward daily practice than not, it was clear that these participants thought otherwise. The most encouraging marks came for the category of prayer: twenty respondents indicated that they prayed daily, while another two included this among their weekly practices.<sup>10</sup> The Scripture disciplines, however, were far less encouraging – only seven indicated that they read or studied Scripture daily, with another six including this among their weekly practices. It was here that I began to see a probable cause of the malaise that had settled over the congregation during recent difficult times – the lack of rootedness in the Word of God, which is, after all, one of those "Big Two" disciplines all believers need to practice. Upon seeing this, I was curious if the sermon on Scripture had prompted some folks to take up the discipline with more frequency.<sup>11</sup>

When it came to the other disciplines in this series, the results were mixed. No respondents indicated that they fasted daily, and only one indicated that fasting was

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<sup>9</sup> Respondent Seventeen, Reflection Journal. Initial Information. September – October 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Some folks listed the same discipline as being practiced daily, weekly, and/or monthly. When this happened, I listed the discipline in the category of greatest frequency only.

<sup>11</sup> For an answer to these musings, see pages 109ff.

practiced weekly. Both solitude and silence were indicated as daily practices by six individuals, while another one (solitude) or two (silence) listed it among their weekly practices. Seventeen individuals listed worship among their weekly practices, while only two said they worshipped the Lord daily. Twelve, however, said they gave thanks daily, while another four listed that among their weekly practices. In the few comments that were given for these questions, however, it was clear that for some, at least, there was a misunderstanding about practicing these things as spiritual disciplines – i.e., they indicated that since they lived alone, they often were by themselves in a quiet house. I wondered if they recognized the difference between being alone and quiet, and being alone and quiet with the Lord.

The final question I asked in the Initial Information section of the Reflection Journal was “how do you hope to benefit from this project?” Surprisingly, two respondents indicated that they were filling out the journals simply to help me with my Doctorate of Ministry. One even wrote, “I am doing this for you. If I get something spiritually out of it, too, it is a (sic) unexpected blessing.”<sup>12</sup> While I found this flattering, I also was a bit frustrated, as I did not wish to be the focus of this project; I wanted the spiritual health of the congregation and the intentionality of their faith to be the focus. Nevertheless, I knew that God could still use the project for them, too. Much more heartening were the six respondents who indicated that they were hoping to gain a greater closeness to the Lord and/or a stronger faith from the experience, along with the six others who indicated that they hoped to gain a greater discipline, or a greater experience

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<sup>12</sup> Respondent One, Reflection Journal. Initial Information. September – October 2017.

with the disciplines. Perhaps most impressive was this comment from Respondent

Twelve:

I'd like to find more balance in my spiritual discipline. Now, I tend to find myself using an "all or nothing" approach in which I spend at least 45 minutes on prayer and study or no time at all. I think that this is because it takes me some time to unplug from the world and focus. Because my life is not one that lends itself well to routine, however, I'd like to be able to find ways to find that focus on God, and the ability to unplug from distractions (most of which come from my own mind, which appears to be inhabited many days by a colony of crazed squirrels . . . ), more quickly and effectively. In the end, though, I know that it's all about my own intentions and mindfulness, so any help I can get with that would be really great.<sup>13</sup>

With such care and reflection from even one respondent, I already suspected that this series had potential to make a difference in the life of the congregation as a whole. I was anxious to move on to the answers I had been given for Week One.

### **Sermon One Questions: Introduction**

As I crafted the questions in response to this introductory sermon, I wanted to be sure to write them in such a way that the answers given would reflect whether or not a person had "gotten it" – i.e., whether or not they had understood the message of the sermon. As such, I asked as my first question "Why is it important to be *intentional* in our relationship with God?" The answers I got were quite encouraging. One woman wrote, "To be intentional is to be committed in our faith. To be committed means that we assign it a high priority."<sup>14</sup> Another wrote, "When we are not intentional, we become lazy, sloppy, lackadasical (sic). Maybe we are less godly. It's like most things we do! Practice, Practice, Practice or we become lazy."<sup>15</sup> Still another wrote "God does not want

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<sup>13</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Initial Information. September – October 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Respondent Five, Reflection Journal. Week One Questions. September 3, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Respondent Nine, Reflection Journal. Week One Questions. September 3, 2017.

wishy-washy, half-hearted efforts from us. God wants us to be intentional as a full time job to Practice the Disciplines toward the Prize of Godliness.”<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the best answer was the one which was most terse: in response to why one should be intentional in one’s relationship with God, one person simply wrote “To HAVE one.”<sup>17</sup> For this question, every single answer was on-point, with no “left field” or “head scratcher” answers, which pleased me greatly.<sup>18</sup>

My next question, however, brought this down to the personal level: “How are you currently being intentional in your spiritual life?” As the answers to the initial questions would lead one to believe, most respondents answered by talking about their prayers, though a few also mentioned Scripture. One individual wrote “I set aside prayer time every day. Very few things stop me from attending church on Sunday”<sup>19</sup> Another wrote how he has “strongly felt the need to change my life. I want to be on the ‘inside’ as I appear on the ‘outside’.”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the most comprehensive answer came from Respondent Fourteen, who wrote:

I’m trying. I try to read my devotional on a daily basis. Study the comments about the Scripture from my Life Application Bible. Worship services at church help me. Giving thanks is done throughout the day. I’m working on spending more Quiet time. I need to think about fasting more often.<sup>21</sup>

By and large, most respondents mentioned a few things they did intentionally, and with this, recognized that there was room to grow in this intentionality.

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<sup>16</sup> Respondent Fourteen, Reflection Journal. Week One Questions. September 3, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Respondent Nineteen, Reflection Journal. Week One Questions. September 3, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> For week one, I only had twenty-two answers for each question. Respondent Twenty-Two indicated that she missed church this week, and either chose not to watch the sermon online or via DVD, or did not have the technological capability to do so.

<sup>19</sup> Respondent Five, Reflection Journal. Week One Questions. September 3, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Respondent Four, Reflection Journal. Week One Questions. September 3, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Respondent Fourteen, Reflection Journal. Week One Questions. September 3, 2017.

The final question for this week was “What does it mean to be godly? Is this something you desire in your life?” With this question, I wanted to leave the respondent with something to ponder in the week ahead. After all, this sermon was titled “Engines for Growth, Training in Godliness” – I wanted the congregation to make that link in their own minds, that *they* were to seek godliness purposefully. Interestingly, eight different respondents picked up the thread from this sermon that these disciplines were all habits that Jesus himself practiced - each of these folks defined godliness as being more like Jesus, or to act more like Jesus. Respondent Five wrote, “I think it means to be more like Christ in how we live our lives. I very much desire this,”<sup>22</sup> while Respondent Two wrote “To do like Jesus did in his relationship with mankind – devout – pray – demonstrat (sic) and give graditude (sic).”<sup>23</sup> Along with this, Respondent Twelve wrote “To be godly means being like Christ – in our actions, words, and thoughts – and working to build the Kingdom of God on earth. This is my life’s greatest desire.”<sup>24</sup> Perhaps most touching was what Respondent Fourteen wrote:

To be a Godly person is someone like *[here, she listed several members of the congregation by name]* who practice all Disciplines on a dailey (sic) basis and it shows in how they react to situations good and bad. Yes, I do desire to be more godly in my life. I’m so happy Joshua you are doing this series on “Training for godliness.” I’ve already been encouraged by the thoughts and suggestions that I’ve learned.<sup>25</sup>

Again, as with the questions asked in the Initial Information section, these answers left me hopeful about the potential which the remaining five sermons might have upon those

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<sup>22</sup> Respondent Five, Reflection Journal. Week One Questions. September 3, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Respondent Two, Reflection Journal. Week One Questions. September 3, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Week One Questions. September 3, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Respondent Fourteen, Reflection Journal. Week One Questions. September 3, 2017.

who were thinking and reflecting so deeply upon the material I was commending to the congregation. Things were beginning well.

### **Sermon Two Questions: Prayer**

With this sermon, of course, I moved from more general questions about the congregation's spiritual lives and about the spiritual disciplines as a whole to questions about a specific discipline – namely prayer. I chose to begin with a question that again I thought would gauge how well the respondents had listened to the sermon itself: “Why is prayer a necessary discipline for all Christians?” Fully fourteen of the respondents grasped the key point that prayer is the means to have a closer relationship with God. Respondent Twelve wrote “Being a Christian means having a relationship with God. Relationships require communication, and prayer is our means of communication with God; hence, prayer is necessary to that relationship,”<sup>26</sup> while Respondent Three wrote “Deepens one's faith; relationship with God; permits personal interaction and communication one to one, with God; enables one to praise, ask forgiveness, provide thanksgiving; seek advice and direction directly from God.”<sup>27</sup> Some, however, did not seem to pick up on this point; Respondent Eleven, who, in the questions he chose to answer – which was only about half for any particular week – was always terse in his answers to the point of being almost taciturn, simply wrote “Because the Bible tells us to.”<sup>28</sup> In the same spirit, Respondent Eighteen wrote “To keep in tune with the Holy

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<sup>26</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Respondent Three, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Respondent Eleven, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions, September 10, 2017

Spirit.”<sup>29</sup> While most of the respondents seemed to “get it,” it was clear that there were a few who, at the very least, did not communicate “it” in their answers.

My second question for this week was a multi-level question. I asked the respondents to describe their own prayer lives, first asking how often they prayed. While I had asked this before in the Initial Information portion of the Reflection Journal, I thought that after a couple weeks, and with hopefully at least a somewhat deeper understanding of prayer and the spiritual disciplines in general, the answers might have changed. Sixteen respondents indicated that they definitely prayed daily, with a goodly number of those indicating that they prayed more than once each day. This is lower than the twenty who had indicated in the Initial Information section that they prayed daily; nevertheless, there were several others who indicated in this week’s questions that while they might not pray daily, they certainly prayed a lot, either answering “Most days,”<sup>30</sup> “Most days when I am home. More like 60-70% of days when I’m on the road,”<sup>31</sup> “When I feel the need,”<sup>32</sup> or “4-5 x per week.”<sup>33</sup> One respondent, however, simply responded “Probably not often enough,”<sup>34</sup> which, while perhaps honest, did not give me any idea what that might mean.

The second part of this question asked where the respondents prayed, and with this, whether they had a “prayer closet,” which I had referenced in the sermon. I did not really expect to learn much from this question – instead, I included it because I wanted the congregation to think about their prayer habits, and whether or not they were

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<sup>29</sup> Respondent Eighteen, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions, September 10, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Respondent Six, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Respondent Twenty, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Respondent Twenty-Three, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Respondent Nine, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

intentional about the space in which they chose to pray. Only two respondents indicated that they had a prayer closet or “War Room,” referencing the movie of that name which one of the congregation’s small groups had recently finished studying.<sup>35</sup> The answers to this question reflected a wide smattering of places, from bedrooms to kitchen tables to living room chairs and couches. Fully nine different respondents indicated that they prayed “anywhere.”

I found similar results to the third piece of this question, which asked when the respondents prayed. The most popular answers were morning and evening, with some respondents indicating both times. One respondent indicated that she prayed four times daily.<sup>36</sup> Several indicated that they prayed before meals, or when they read their Bibles. A few simply wrote “Anytime,”<sup>37</sup> or “Almost anytime,”<sup>38</sup> indicating that there was no real formal scheduled time of the day in which those respondents prayed. The vast majority of respondents, however, indicated that they had at least one set time for prayer each day.

The penultimate portion of this second question about prayer asked with whom the respondents prayed regularly. Surprisingly, twelve of the twenty-three respondents indicated that they only prayed by themselves.<sup>39</sup> Five indicated that they prayed with a spouse, while seven indicated praying with others at church, in Sunday School, or in the church’s Monday evening prayer group. One respondent indicated that she had often thought of finding a prayer partner, “but never could bring myself to do it.”<sup>40</sup> As this

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<sup>35</sup> *War Room*, directed by Alex Kendrick (FaithStep Films, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> Respondent Seven, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Respondent Eleven, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Respondent Four, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> One of these respondents indicated that he prayed sometimes with his dead wife. I am still trying to wrap my mind around that.

<sup>40</sup> Respondent Sixteen, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.



particular sermon stressed the importance of praying both individually and corporately, I hoped that the respondents would consider taking steps to strengthen both types of prayer in their lives.

The final portion of this question asked what tools or aids the respondents used in their prayers. In the sermon, I stressed that part of being intentional in prayer, besides considering the time and space for prayer, was to gather the necessary materials to help one pray. Nine different respondents indicated that they used no tools or aids at all, while a few gave somewhat vague answers to this question, writing either that they used the Lord's Prayer as a guide,<sup>41</sup> or, in the words of another respondent, "Nothing specific, just everyday things; beautiful weather, car trips, friends asking for prayers, family, decisions, singing hymns . . . Lord's Prayer."<sup>42</sup> Nine listed the Bible as a tool or aid for prayer, while five listed a daily devotion of some kind. Four indicated that they had prayer lists, or that they used the list of prayer requests included in the church bulletin. It was clear that there was room for growth in this area of the congregation's prayer lives.

This led to the final two questions for this week: "In what ways do you need to grow in your prayer life," and "What one step will you take *this week* to accomplish that?" In phrasing the questions this way, I wanted to be sure not to let folks "off the hook," as it were, but to challenge them to take at least one specific step to grow in prayer that week. The responses to the first of these questions were all over the map. Taciturn Respondent Number Eleven simply answered "?" to this question,<sup>43</sup> while Respondent Twenty simply wrote "In every way,"<sup>44</sup> which, while perhaps accurate, does not really

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<sup>41</sup> Respondent Fifteen, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions, September 10, 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Respondent Nine, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Respondent Eleven, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Respondent Twenty, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

give any specifics. One respondent, however, mentioned that she was considering joining the women's study and prayer group which was scheduled to begin meeting the next month,<sup>45</sup> while another wrote that he needed to "create specific list of peoples (sic) names to pray about."<sup>46</sup> One particularly thoughtful respondent wrote about her desire to "learn how to hear from God better. I would like to learn to quiet my mind + spend time in silence. I am improving but I need to pray first instead of worrying or reacting to a situation."<sup>47</sup> Still others mentioned the need for greater focus, greater consistency, or greater intentionality in their prayers. It was clear that most were willing to think deeply about their prayer lives, but that a few, for whatever reason, were not.

This same pattern showed in the final question – the one which challenged the respondents to commit to one step to move toward the goal of growth in prayer. Several respondents left this question blank, or gave themselves an out, such as "Been working on this for years, but haven't improved. A.D.D.?"<sup>48</sup> Respondent Twenty answered "Try to slow down to speed up,"<sup>49</sup> an answer he would go on to give on three other occasions in his Reflection Journal, and one which still mystifies me thoroughly, as I have no idea what it means. There were, however, some truly thoughtful answers, as well, such as Respondent One, who said she would finish cleaning out a specific room in her house which she wished to turn into her prayer closet,<sup>50</sup> or Respondent Five, who said she would start "making a list or an outline so nothing is forgotten."<sup>51</sup> Respondent Ten wrote that he would "take more time to pray. Don't just sit for a few minutes + rattle something

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<sup>45</sup> Respondent Three, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Respondent Twenty-Three, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Respondent Eight, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Respondent Nineteen, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Respondent Twenty, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Respondent One, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Respondent Five, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

off,”<sup>52</sup> while Respondent Eight, anticipating a future sermon, wrote that she would “Try to spend 5 min each day in silence.”<sup>53</sup> On the whole, the answers to the questions on prayer were encouraging. The vast majority of respondents had clearly listened well to the sermon and had thought deeply about their own prayer lives as they answered the questions. One-third of the way into the project, it looked like things were moving toward a positive result.

### **Sermon Three Questions: The Scripture Disciplines**

The questions asked in this section almost exactly paralleled those asked after the sermon on prayer. I began with a question which sought to gauge how well the respondents had grasped the main point of the message: “Why is the study of Scripture a necessary discipline for all Christians?” The answers given, however, were perhaps a little less encouraging than the previous week’s responses. Only eight respondents specifically mentioned the role the Word has in their relationship with God, or how it helps them to know God. Another three respondents mentioned specifically how God speaks through Scripture. Some of these answers were, however, quite encouraging, such as when Respondent Three wrote “It is the Word of God, communicating directly to me, telling me what I should do, how to act, how to resolve problems, what is right and wrong – my direct personal relationship with God,”<sup>54</sup> or when Respondent Five wrote “I suppose that we really can’t know our Lord without reading His Book.”<sup>55</sup> Respondent Four also dazzled by writing “It is God ‘reaching out’ to us. He provides the foundation

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<sup>52</sup> Respondent Ten, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Respondent Eight, Reflection Journal. Week Two Questions. September 10, 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Respondent Three, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Respondent Five, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

for our relation (sic) to/with Him.”<sup>56</sup> These are the kinds of statements which make a pastor’s heart soar.

Others, though, in their answers betrayed a less dynamic understanding of Scripture as merely a book for information. Respondent Thirteen wrote “Because it helps you be a better Christian. You learn God’s words and what he expects of you, helps you understand what you need to do.”<sup>57</sup> Respondent Nine wrote “We need to know the Bible. It is Christian/Jewish history. It is the story of Jesus. It is a guide for living. It helps us learn about our faith and a reminder and helper. It is the word of God. (I probably forgot some reasons.)”<sup>58</sup> Perhaps most confounding was the answer given by Respondent Twenty-Two: “To know in biblical times how things were done + why. In other words history + I never liked the subject, so I do struggle when it comes to studying Scripture.”<sup>59</sup> While these answers are not necessarily wrong *per se*, they do not seem to reflect an understanding of a lively, personal interaction with God through his Word. Of course, this does not mean that these respondents did not hear this in the sermon – it simply means they did not communicate it in their answers. Still, these responses gave me pause.

As with the previous week, I also included a multi-level question asking for multiple details regarding the respondent’s current practices with the discipline – in this case, Scripture. Again, I first asked a question about frequency: “How often do you read the Bible?” In this case, the information given in the Initial Information section of the journal (seven daily readers and six weekly readers) held to be generally true: only eight

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<sup>56</sup> Respondent Four, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Respondent Thirteen, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Respondent Nine, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Respondent Twenty-Two, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

indicated that they read the Bible daily, with six others indicating that they read it weekly. One respondent indicated that she had recently changed from weekly to daily reading within the past month, perhaps indicating the positive impact this project had had on her spiritual life.<sup>60</sup> Added to this were four respondents who fell somewhere between daily and weekly interactions with the Word, answering “3+ times/week,”<sup>61</sup> “Besides church + Bible Study, probably 2-3 times,”<sup>62</sup> “Most days,”<sup>63</sup> and “5 times a week.”<sup>64</sup> Five respondents, however, replied with the troubling information that they had little to no regular interaction with the Word; their answers ranged from “rarely”<sup>65</sup> to “Seldom,”<sup>66</sup> with one respondent (the one who disliked history so much) simply writing “0” as her answer.<sup>67</sup>

The troubling pattern continued in the second portion of the question, which asked how often the respondents meditated upon Scripture. Five indicated that they meditated upon Scripture daily or often – though, confusingly, this included a respondent who indicated that she rarely read Scripture. Further investigation of this respondent’s other answers indicated that she read Sarah Young’s book *Jesus Calling* each day, and probably included this in her meditations.<sup>68</sup> With this, four respondents indicated that they meditated weekly, with one other indicating that she meditated more than once a week, but not daily. Only one asked about the meaning of the term meditation – something I had tried to be clear about in my sermon: “Depends on what ‘meditate’

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<sup>60</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>61</sup> Respondent Three, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Respondent Nine, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> Respondent Ten, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Respondent Eighteen, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Respondent Twenty-One, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Respondent Twenty-Three, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Respondent Twenty-Two, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>68</sup> Respondent Twenty-One, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

means. I stop to think and pray about the meaning of scripture as I read.”<sup>69</sup> All the others indicated that this was not among their spiritual practices.

More encouraging was the level of participation in Sunday School, Bible Study, or some other kind of study group: fourteen answered in the affirmative to one of those options, with one other indicating that she participated in the book studies I usually teach during the summer. It encouraged me that fully two-thirds of the participants were involved in learning the Scriptures and learning their faith in some way.

When asked what tools or aids the respondents used in their study of Scripture, the array of answers was fascinating. Seven respondents answered that they used a Study Bible or notes in their Bible while reading; after five years of promoting the use of Study Bibles in the congregation, this made me very pleased. Five others indicated that they read some kind of devotional material each day, with “Upper Room,” and “Daily Bread” being the most often mentioned. Seven others indicated the use of some other kind of Bible study or reference book, with Strong’s *Concordance*, Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*, and the aforementioned *Jesus Calling* all getting a shout-out. Also rounding out the answers were two who indicated that they used the internet as a resource, two who said they referred back to the church bulletin or to notes from sermons, and one who listed me as a resource. Four respondents indicated that they used no tools or aids at all, which, given the number who said they seldom or never read Scripture, was a surprisingly low number.

The final piece of this multi-level question was an inquiry into whether or not the respondents were working to memorize Scripture. Only five indicated that they were

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<sup>69</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

currently engaged in this practice, with Respondent Fourteen writing “Yes, each week since the series on the disciplines has begun I’m trying to memorize a Scripture.”<sup>70</sup> One gentleman wrote that he was not working to memorize Scripture, but “I know quite a few,”<sup>71</sup> while two others indicated that they either did this in the past, or had tried it in the past. With this information, and with all that had been told to me in this long, multi-level question, my suspicions that the congregation needed to grow in its reading, studying, pondering, and memorization of Scripture were confirmed.

The question, however, was whether the congregation itself recognized this. Question Three for this week was “In what ways do you need to grow in the Scripture disciplines?” Seven respondents wrote that they needed to increase the frequency of their time in Scripture, with Respondent Five writing that she needed “to make myself read the Bible daily,”<sup>72</sup> and Respondent Twenty-Three responding “Read the Bible more.”<sup>73</sup> Seven also indicated that they needed to spend time reading with greater focus, or to spend time pondering or meditating upon the Scriptures as they read. As an example of this, Respondent Ten wrote “I need to take some time when reading + think about the passages I’m reading, meditate on them. Often times I rush through it too quickly.”<sup>74</sup> No other patterns emerged, except for the three who wrote that they needed to improve “in every way.”<sup>75</sup> There were, however, a few single answers that were intriguing, such as Respondent Two, who wrote “Probably by memorizing certain Scripture (sic).”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Respondent Fourteen, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>71</sup> Respondent Six, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Respondent Five, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Respondent Twenty-Three, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>74</sup> Respondent Ten, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Respondents Fifteen, Twenty and Twenty-Two, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>76</sup> Respondent Two, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

Respondent Twenty-One, who did not read Scripture but meditated upon *Jesus Calling*, wrote “I could start reading the actual Bible.”<sup>77</sup> Two, however, did not answer this question at all, and one wrote “I have increased my prayer and Scripture time and devotion but now feel guilty and unworthy that I do not do more – wonder how others, who do more or less, feel?”<sup>78</sup> While in general, I am pleased with the answers to this question, these few do trouble me. I wish I knew what to do about this.<sup>79</sup>

Again, as with Week Two, the final question for Week Three was an application question: “What one step will you take *this week* to accomplish this?” Here again, the answers were a little disappointing. Some set out a clear plan, such as Respondent Five, who wrote “I plan to set aside at least 30 minutes daily to read and reflect on Scripture,”<sup>80</sup> or Respondent Seventeen, who wrote that she would “Attend Bible Study.”<sup>81</sup> One woman wrote that she would go to bed an hour earlier, presumably so she could get up earlier to have time to read Scripture before she went to work.<sup>82</sup> Most delightful was the former educator who wrote that she would “Renew my commitment to remain grounded in scripture through consistent and disciplined reading. Self-accountability may be important in this – maybe a visual record like a gold star on my calendar when I have spent time in scripture (and a ☹ when I haven’t!).”<sup>83</sup> Five, however, either did not answer this question, or wrote that they didn’t know what they would do. A few wrote

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<sup>77</sup> Respondent Twenty-One, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>78</sup> Respondent Three, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Later in the series, I did have a conversation with Respondent Three. We talked about the guilt she had over “not doing enough,” and how this was not what these disciplines were about at all. Later, following my Reformation Day sermon on the five Reformation *solae*, she came to me again and joyfully told me how she “finally got it” – how grace cancelled out her guilt. That was a good day to be a pastor.

<sup>80</sup> Respondent Five, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>81</sup> Respondent Seventeen, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>82</sup> Respondent Eight, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>83</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.



that they would continue the practices they already have. Some wrote a more generic answer, like “Try to read more Scripture.”<sup>84</sup> From all this, I decided that while I had perhaps made a good start in commending the disciplines of reading, studying, and meditating upon Scripture, more work was definitely needed in this area. As with prayer, a congregation’s dedication (or lack thereof) to Scripture is a direct indicator of its spiritual health and vitality.

#### **Sermon Four Questions: Fasting**

With this week’s questions, I knew I would be challenging the congregation to consider a discipline with which they were both unfamiliar and skeptical. My time teaching on fasting in my first Doctor of Ministry project had taught me that. I therefore began with another question which I believed would gauge whether or not they had grasped the key idea of the sermon: “Why is fasting an important discipline for Christians to practice?” By and large, the range of answers I received were encouraging. Respondent Six wrote “Fasting helps us feel the hunger for Christ and will (sic) for our life. Also it helps us overcome temptation and is a way to combat what negatively controls our life,”<sup>85</sup> while Respondent Eighteen wrote “Under times of stress our physical hunger will help us to hunger more for God’s guidance. We completely shut everything out of our inds (sic) to focus.”<sup>86</sup> Perhaps the most encouraging answer came from Respondent Twelve, who wrote:

It is a way of intentionally delineating the things of the world versus our connection to/relationship with God. By recognizing how we rely on those “things” (food, electronics, etc.) and temporarily removing them, we learn to

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<sup>84</sup> Respondent Twenty-Three, Reflection Journal. Week Three Questions. September 17, 2017.

<sup>85</sup> Respondent Six, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>86</sup> Respondent Eighteen, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

place our reliance on God. This serves to not only remove distractions, but also to keep our reliance on the world in proper balance with our reliance on God.<sup>87</sup>

The vast majority of the other answers reflected a basic grasp of the importance of fasting in this way: as a discipline for the believer's appetites, as a spur toward greater hunger for God, and as a way to reveal what besides God may control the believer's lives. A few respondents, however, merely replied that fasting was Biblical, or that it was commanded by God,<sup>88</sup> while one respondent bizarrely replied that fasting was important "I guess to prove to themselves that they can fast."<sup>89</sup> By and large, however, most of the participants showed that they had listened to and understood the basic points of the sermon.

My next two questions were designed to make the respondents reflect on their own practice of this discipline – to reflect whether or not they were indeed practicing this powerful Biblical discipline. Question two simply asked "How often do you fast?" Fully sixteen of the respondents replied that they do not fast at all. As per the initial information, only one indicated that he fasted regularly, writing "Usually one day a week and looking to the future as possibly 2 days."<sup>90</sup> Two respondents indicated that they practicing fasting during the season of Lent,<sup>91</sup> while one other respondent answered that she fasted once each year, which I presume to be during that season.<sup>92</sup> The other answers given were only tangential to fasting as a spiritual discipline; one respondent talked about her dietary need to stay away from certain foods, which for her "takes prayer to not eat these things some days,"<sup>93</sup> while another wrote "Rarely – but occasionally, I will work up

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<sup>87</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>88</sup> Respondents Five, Eleven, and Nineteen, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Respondent Twenty-Two, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>90</sup> Respondent Six, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>91</sup> Respondents Three and Fourteen, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>92</sup> Respondent Thirteen, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>93</sup> Respondent One, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

the determination to do something I really need to do and simply – fast – meaning quit doing it – fast from it – and I usually ask God to give me the strength.”<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, one woman wrote that while she had never fasted for spiritual purposes, she had undertaken electronic fasts as a way to have greater concentration in her work. “This is probably a great illustration of the value of fasting – and a nudge to me about the spiritual value.”<sup>95</sup> While these answers were expected, it was still sad to see how few had experienced the blessing of this discipline in their lives.

The next question followed up by asking the participants to name the kinds of fasting they currently practiced. I gave them a list to choose from, including a Lenten fast, a technology fast, fasting for discernment, the Daniel fast, juice fasting, and total fasting. In asking this, I not only wanted to see if any participants had tried these different options, but also to give the participants an opportunity to think about the kinds of fasting they could try in preparation for the challenge question still to come. Not surprisingly, the experience with the different kinds of fasting was not broad or varied among the respondents. Eight indicated that they had done some kind of Lenten fasting in the past, while two indicated that they had fasted for medical purposes. The gentleman who had answered before that he fasted once each week wrote that he practiced total fasting, with the exception of water and black coffee.<sup>96</sup> Two others mentioned either having practiced, or wanting to try electronic fasts. Beyond this, there were no other options mentioned.

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<sup>94</sup> Respondent Two, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>95</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>96</sup> Respondent Six, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

The final two questions were again designed to challenge the respondents to commit to trying the discipline of fasting. Question Four asked “How could you grow in the practice of this discipline?” Compared with previous weeks, the answers here were lukewarm at best. Several respondents indicated that they would think about fasting, such as Respondent Ten, who wrote “I should definitely think more about doing this + just give it more thought.”<sup>97</sup> Another respondent wrote about a previous experience with fasting which led to a serious medical reaction; she was not keen on repeating that experience, and therefore had ruled out all kinds of fasting altogether.<sup>98</sup> Still another noted drolly “At my age, old habits are hard to break.”<sup>99</sup> Still, a few answers did stand out in encouraging ways. Respondent Nine wrote that she would “give it a try using some techniques that don’t include food! This sermon reminded us to use fasting to focus on prayer.”<sup>100</sup> Similarly, Respondent Thirteen wrote “Now that I have a better understanding of fasting and exactly what it means I will be fasting more often.”<sup>101</sup> Reading these answers, I remembered something my father often said: “If this sermon was only for those two people, then praise God!”

The final question for this week made the challenge to the participant more specific: “What one step will you take *this week* to accomplish this?” Again, many of the answers were lukewarm at best. Several respondents indicated that they would pray about fasting; while I fully support prayer, I also knew that this was probably just Christian-speak for “I do not want to do this, but I also do not want to hurt you with a flat

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<sup>97</sup> Respondent Ten, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>98</sup> Respondent Eighteen, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>99</sup> Respondent Fifteen, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017. In the Initial Information section of her journal, this respondent indicated that she was ninety-one years old.

<sup>100</sup> Respondent Nine, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>101</sup> Respondent Thirteen, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

refusal.” Nevertheless, there were some encouraging commitments. Respondent Eighteen wrote “I will now try another way of fasting. For some reason I never thought of the ways mentioned above. For me, this message was and probably will be the most helpful.”<sup>102</sup> Respondent Five committed to trying the Daniel Fast,<sup>103</sup> while Respondent Four wrote “I will choose a 24 hr period and do my best.”<sup>104</sup> Sadly, however, Respondent Sixteen still appeared to be confused by the whole idea, writing “I’m not sure I truly understand or believe in the value of fasting. (I do believe in giving 100% of my attention to God in my meditation and giving up “other” things for the time and energy to worship God.”<sup>105</sup>

Surprisingly, however, of all the questions in the Reflection Journal, this was the one place where I got feedback “after the fact”; here, and only here, several respondents followed up in writing with the plan they had committed to for the week, either for good or for ill. Respondent Nine indicated that she would think about fasting “and maybe plan to try something,” while noting later in parentheses “I didn’t do it.”<sup>106</sup> Respondent Twelve wrote:

I’m going to undertake a 48-hour social media fast. (Postscript: This was actually really gratifying, but I didn’t feel as though I was actually giving something up but more as though I was gaining something (time!). Not so sure it was really a spiritual fast, although it was a useful exercise in general! I think I’d need to be more specific about it – i.e., spending the time in prayer rather than on social media – than I was. I just worked more . . . ☺)<sup>107</sup>

With this, Respondent Twenty-Two wrote “I’m still thinking what I’ll give up. I have lots I could do . . . (The sermon that Joshua gave on fasting on 9/24 was the best sermon I

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<sup>102</sup> Respondent Eighteen, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>103</sup> Respondent Five, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>104</sup> Respondent Four, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>105</sup> Respondent Sixteen, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>106</sup> Respondent Nine, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>107</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

have ever heard. It was just so interesting + surely opened my eyes + ears on fasting. Thanks Joshua.)”<sup>108</sup> While I knew that fasting would be a hard sell for folks, the fact that I got three different follow-up answers during this week showed me that this sermon had, in some way, stayed with people, and had left a challenge in their minds. I take that as a “win!”

### **Sermon Five Questions: Solitude and Silence**

With this week’s questions, I continued to follow the pattern I had established in previous weeks, first asking a question that was intended to measure the respondents’ comprehension of the sermon, then asking about their current practice of the discipline, and finally asking them to make a specific commitment to practicing that week’s disciplines.<sup>109</sup> As with the previous weeks, the answers to the first question (“Why are silence and solitude important disciplines for Christians to practice today?”) indicated a firm grasp of the main points of the sermon. Respondent Seven wrote, “Because silence + solitude allows you to be able to hear God’s voice as he talks to you. Jesus did these acts often,”<sup>110</sup> while Respondent Eight replied “We are so busy + our lives a (sic) so over stimulated by music, TV, radio, phones, emails and such. We need to quiet our environment + our minds so we can commune with God + hear his direction to us.”<sup>111</sup> Respondent Thirteen also showed an understanding of these disciplines with her answer: “Because of the crazy lifestyles and constantly being on the go, you never take time out

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<sup>108</sup> Respondent Twenty-Two, Reflection Journal. Week Four Questions. September 24, 2017.

<sup>109</sup> As was the case for week one, I only had twenty-two answers for each question this week. Respondent Twenty-Two again indicated that she missed church this week, and either chose not to hear the sermon another way, or did not have the technological capacity to do so.

<sup>110</sup> Respondent Seven, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>111</sup> Respondent Eight, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

from your daily routine to just find peace and quiet so you can concentrate on prayer and time for God,”<sup>112</sup> while Respondent Fourteen seized upon one of the key points of this sermon: “If Jesus found time for solitude and silence to help him how much more it is important that we practice it to give us strength to get through the storms in our lives.”<sup>113</sup> Answers like these – plus the fact that no “left field” answers were given – showed me that the participants were still listening, and that they were digesting the content of the messages even at this point in the project.

When asked how they currently practice these disciplines, and with what frequency, however, the answers given were all over the map. Several indicated that they practice these disciplines regularly, such as Respondent One, who wrote “Daily. I am home alone for prayer + reflection. I also like to drive with the radio off and pray + reflect while driving.”<sup>114</sup> Respondent Two also indicated that he practiced these disciplines regularly: “By praying in the evening – no TV – no radio – only the night sounds – time that I give my full attention to God and sometimes I start my day that way – but more so at night.”<sup>115</sup> Perhaps most encouraging was the response from the woman who wrote “Since this sermon series I’ve tried to do it each day. Before that it was sporadic (sic).”<sup>116</sup>

Others, however, indicated that they struggled with these disciplines, such as Respondent Five, who wrote “I try but I cannot keep my mind from racing ahead,”<sup>117</sup> or Respondent Eight, who indicated that she was trying to practice this discipline, but did

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<sup>112</sup> Respondent Thirteen, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>113</sup> Respondent Fourteen, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>114</sup> Respondent One, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>115</sup> Respondent Two, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>116</sup> Respondent Fourteen, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>117</sup> Respondent Five, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

not feel she was doing as well as she would like: “I’m not very good about quieting my mind. Since this series began I have been going to bed an hour earlier + actually studying Scripture along with my devotion. I quiet my mind but then fall asleep!”<sup>118</sup> Only two respondents indicated that they never practiced these disciplines, while several others indicated that they were often quiet or alone, but did not indicate that they were necessarily quiet and alone with the Lord. Respondent Nine wrote that she lived alone, and that she liked “silence and solitude but don’t use the time well. I don’t have the TV/music on much. I like the quiet of being outdoors.”<sup>119</sup> Clearly, these disciplines were much more popular than fasting, but there was also room to grow here.

The next question asked whether or not the respondents had ever taken a spiritual retreat, and if they had, to please elaborate. This was a practice I had mentioned specifically in this sermon – that one would purposefully take an extended time of silence and solitude away from the world so that one could be quiet and alone with God. Nine respondents answered that they had not done this, while several others talked about retreats, camps, and conferences of different varieties that they had participated in, from women’s retreats with various churches which “involved more fellowship than silence/solitude,”<sup>120</sup> to choir retreats which seemed to include such noisy fellowship activities as cantatas, skits, and well-catered luncheons.<sup>121</sup> A few, however, enthusiastically reported on past experiences with the Walk to Emmaus (three respondents), or with Promise Keepers (one respondent). Three respondents described youth retreats from their past, including Respondent Nineteen, who cryptically wrote

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<sup>118</sup> Respondent Eight, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>119</sup> Respondent Nine, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>120</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>121</sup> Respondent Eighteen, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.



“Yes – in high school. Nothing to report.”<sup>122</sup> Two others talked about less planned or structured times out in nature, such as Respondent Sixteen, who wrote “No not officially – But until last few years spent time alone in the woods or elsewhere, in thankfulness and listening.”<sup>123</sup> I really had not expected to have received so many positive answers to this question, and was therefore pleasantly surprised to see such a familiarity with this purposeful practicing of these disciplines.

As seen in the past, however, the questions asked to provoke personal commitment to the practice of these disciplines yielded a mixed bag of results. When asked “How can you grow in your practice of these disciplines?”, there were a few encouraging answers. Respondent Two wrote “Create my own war room – a place to pray and meditate, a place to listen. A time + place to slow down – clear my head and talk to God – to reinforce my faith. To let the peace break in – “<sup>124</sup> while Respondent Fourteen showed that she was inspired by one of the examples used in the sermon: “By being more faithful in finding time for this discipline. If Susannah (sic) Wesley with her 19 children could find time by throwing her apron over her head, I surely can be more faithful!”<sup>125</sup> Respondent Twelve, always one of my wordier respondents, answered with the following:

I can cultivate silence. As I mentioned above, I have plenty (probably too much!) solitude, however silence doesn’t come with solitude much of the time. In solitude, my thoughts are often very loud and distracting. I’ve had some success with practicing meditation to achieve silence, but it sure isn’t easy! I really admire the mindfulness practices of Eastern cultures and have been inspired by the focus the Buddhists place on this, and the fact that they understand that it requires constant discipline and attention to be present. (Just as a side note, I want to clarify that I differentiate between Buddhism as a set of beliefs and the

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<sup>122</sup> Respondent Nineteen, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>123</sup> Respondent Sixteen, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>124</sup> Respondent Two, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>125</sup> Respondent Fourteen, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

tools Buddhists use – I don’t identify with their beliefs [or lack thereof], but they pretty much wrote the book on strategies to manage the noise of the world and our thoughts ☺).<sup>126</sup>

Others, however, were not so intentional in their thinking on this question. Two individuals did not answer the question at all, while two wrote that they did not need to grow in this area, answering either “I am there now,”<sup>127</sup> or “I think I do well in this area.”<sup>128</sup> Still others gave easy answers, such as “Keep working at it,”<sup>129</sup> or “Slow down.”<sup>130</sup> I wondered if perhaps some respondents were becoming burnt out with having to reflect at this level, or if perhaps they did not see the need to do so for these particular disciplines. Either way, I was glad that at least some were still willing to think deeply about these spiritual practices.

The final question for this week, as with previous weeks, asked “What one step will you take *this week* to accomplish this?”, i.e., to accomplish growth in the disciplines of silence and solitude. I was surprised at how many respondents answered with specific, concrete action plans for their week. Respondent Six wrote “1.) Set alarm clock, 2.) Go to bed earlier,”<sup>131</sup> while Respondent Twenty wrote that he would “Put up reminder signs to stop, slow down, and think.”<sup>132</sup> Respondent Sixteen indicated that “Actually filling out these forms has been a quiet time for me. A time of reflection. (P.S. I often tend to

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<sup>126</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>127</sup> Respondent Thirteen, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>128</sup> Respondent Eighteen, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>129</sup> Respondent Five, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>130</sup> Respondent Twenty, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017. This is the respondent who so often wrote “Slow down to speed up.” Clearly, this individual was very concerned about the pace of his life.

<sup>131</sup> Respondent Six, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>132</sup> Respondent Twenty, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

meditate during long quiet times when the symphony is playing. Not silence exactly – but God’s soothing voice.)”<sup>133</sup>

As usual, though, there were a handful of folks who failed to answer this question, or who simply wrote “Don’t know.”<sup>134</sup> I also received some of the more interesting “left field” answers here, such as the woman who wrote that she would “try to practice silence time each day by going to the bathroom, turn off lights and have time talking and sharing with Jesus,”<sup>135</sup> or the woman who wrote that she “will take a little more time critiquing myself.”<sup>136</sup> Nevertheless, by and large, the answers to Week Five’s questions and challenges were, for the most part, encouraging. While some folks might perhaps have reached “project fatigue,” still with only one week left, the project seemed to be bearing fruit.

### **Sermon Six Questions: Worship and Thanksgiving**

My purpose for placing these disciplines at the end of the project was to “go out on a high note” – to end with praise and gratitude to God. Thankfully, the participants did not disappoint.<sup>137</sup> In the initial question, asking why worship and thanksgiving are important disciplines for believers to practice, Respondent Fifteen wrote:

One oft times think (sic) of worship as going to church on Sundays and giving thanks. It is really on-going process – a day to day connection with our Lord to

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<sup>133</sup> Respondent Sixteen, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>134</sup> Respondent Nine, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017.

<sup>135</sup> Respondent Fourteen, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017. I hope she does not mean that like it sounds.

<sup>136</sup> Respondent Twenty-One, Reflection Journal. Week Five Questions. October 1, 2017. If she does this quietly, while alone, and while intentionally seeking to be in the presence of God, then maybe that will work.

<sup>137</sup> Again, as was the case for weeks one and five, I did not have a full slate of answers this week. This time, Respondent Twenty-One indicated that she missed church this week, and either chose not to hear the sermon another way, or did not have the technological capacity to do so. Respondent Nineteen left this page blank without any explanation.

give honor and glory to him for his sacrifice for us. It keeps me on a personal relationship with Him.<sup>138</sup>

Respondent Eighteen similarly dazzled with this answer:

Because we are made to worship – people’s gods, money – sports, etc. etc. are misplaced gods to worship. This kind of hunger can only be filled by worshipping the one true God . . . We are to always thank God – even for what seems to bad (sic) for he works everything together for those who love the Lord.<sup>139</sup>

Respondent Two, on the other hand, showed how he had been steeped in the Heidelberg

Catechism with this phenomenal answer:

3 things come to my mind as themes in and throughout the Bible. I call them the 3 G’s – grief, grace, + gratitude. The grief we have for our sins, the grace of God for the forgiveness of our sins; AND the GRADITUDE (sic) we should have for God’s grace – blessing to us – To show our graditude (sic) we should worship + praise God – not only daily in our lives but but (sic) publicly by coming to church and worship + praise him – it is important to worship our God, our maker.<sup>140</sup>

Others similarly astounded with their answers, including Respondent Eight, who wrote simply “That’s what we were created to do!”<sup>141</sup> Not many answers missed the mark here, excepting perhaps Respondent Twenty-Two, who wrote “Because it makes us, in so many ways, be more polite + positive in our everyday doings.”<sup>142</sup> I do not recall saying anything like this in my sermon for that week, and it thoroughly mystifies me that this is the message she heard.

Question Two this week continued the pattern established in previous weeks by asking “How do you currently practice these disciplines?” The majority of participants echoed in some way the answer given by Respondent Five, who wrote “I give thanks

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<sup>138</sup> Respondent Fifteen, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

<sup>139</sup> Respondent Eighteen, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

<sup>140</sup> Respondent Two, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

<sup>141</sup> Respondent Eight, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017. Clearly, this respondent is familiar with the first question of the Westminster Catechisms!

<sup>142</sup> Respondent Twenty-Two, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

daily in prayer. I worship weekly by attending church.”<sup>143</sup> Respondent Four did so with some humor by writing “I express gratitude for my multitude of blessings in every prayer. I am faithful (no pun intended) in my practice of regular attendance @ Sunday services.”<sup>144</sup> While it disappointed me a bit that so many folks still seemed to think of worship only as what believers do within the confines of the sanctuary on Sunday mornings, still I was pleased to read of so many who not only made that Sunday worship a priority, but also made time each day to give thanks to God.

Still, a few answers to this question stood out. Respondent Twelve wrote, “Being sure to incorporate praise and thanksgiving in daily prayer; Worshipping with the congregation; learning through God’s word about His power and love,”<sup>145</sup> Similarly, Respondent Fourteen showed her ability to integrate the various sermon messages from this series by writing, “I try to attend worship services as often as possible and worship at my house by reading Scripture, praying, and learning different kinds of Fasting, quiet time in dark Bathroom, memorizing Bible verses.”<sup>146</sup> Respondent Twenty-Two, however, again showed that she had missed the point of the question:

If someone is lonely + hurting, I take them a homemade pie or cake if I know them well. Otherwise a card that is cheery. This week I got a phone call from two friends who are depressed, and I listened while they told me the problems. Each one was 1 ½ hours + I believe they were better when we ended our call. I felt good that I was the one they called + trusted. Praise God. I hope it helped.<sup>147</sup>

While there is nothing at all wrong with that answer – indeed, it does a pastor’s heart good to read of parishioners who are listening and reaching out to those in need –

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<sup>143</sup> Respondent Five, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

<sup>144</sup> Respondent Four, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

<sup>145</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

<sup>146</sup> Respondent Fourteen, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017. Again, we see God’s wonderful ability to meet us even in quiet bathrooms! Hallelujah!

<sup>147</sup> Respondent Twenty-Two, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

nevertheless, other than the “Praise God” at the end, there is little in that answer about the intentional practice of the disciplines of worship and thanksgiving. Still, most of the other answers were encouraging, and showed at least some grasp of the importance of the practice of these disciplines in the life of a believer.

As with before, I closed this week’s questions with a personal challenge, first by asking “How can you grow in your practice of these disciplines?” The majority of answers ran along the lines of Respondent Three’s answer: “Thank God more often throughout the day.”<sup>148</sup> Respondent One honed this a bit further when she wrote, “Be more thankful for the little things instead of complaining.”<sup>149</sup> Others, however, continued to integrate the various disciplines, such as Respondent Seven, who answered “Bible Study sessions and studying the Bible and meditating on these verses of God,”<sup>150</sup> or Respondent Seventeen, who wrote, “Pray + ask God for help, direction + lessen anxieties. Try not to worry. Read Bible & attend church.”<sup>151</sup> Respondent Eighteen thought along the lines of the Apostle Paul here when she wrote “Not to dwell on the negative but to move quickly erase (sic) that kind of thinking with as (sic) the Bible says – what so ever is lovely, etc. etc., think on these things.”<sup>152</sup> By and large, however, the vast majority of respondents simply replied that they needed to be more faithful or more consistent in practicing these disciplines.

When asked the final question for this week, however – “What one step will you take *this week* to accomplish this?” – I received back several intriguing answers.

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<sup>148</sup> Respondent Three, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

<sup>149</sup> Respondent One, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

<sup>150</sup> Respondent Seven, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

<sup>151</sup> Respondent Seventeen, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

<sup>152</sup> Respondent Eighteen, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

Respondent Six wrote that he would “daily thank God every A.M. when I wake up + before bedtime.”<sup>153</sup> Respondent Five wrote that she would “count even the ‘bad’ things as blessings because, if nothing else, they strengthen us.”<sup>154</sup> Respondents One and Eight picked up on this theme, specifically referring to the illustration I had used from Corrie ten Boom’s *The Hiding Place*,<sup>155</sup> which was used in the sermon, when they wrote, “Be thankful for the flees (sic),”<sup>156</sup> and “Be more thankful throughout the day. Look for the positive points even in bad things (like fleas).”<sup>157</sup> Respondent Twelve, as usual, offered an interesting twist on this answer:

Because I tend to get carried away by the needs of the day and the to-do-list, I’m going to add an item to my list that is to stop and give thanks. As an added reminder I’m going to set the alarm on my phone. Come to think of it, a “Fitbit” for worship and Thanksgiving might be a great idea ☺<sup>158</sup>

It was encouraging to read answers like these at the end of six long weeks of sermons.

All that remained was to consider the Post-Project Questions – ones which would really show if there had been any meaningful growth or change in the lives of these faithful respondents.

### **Post-Project Questions:**

In designing these final questions for the end of the project, I knew that I needed to be sure not to overload the participants, who had already given so much. As much as they wanted to help, and as much as they had hopefully learned from this experience, I knew that they would not have the patience to answer scads of questions after six weeks

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<sup>153</sup> Respondent Six, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

<sup>154</sup> Respondent Five, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

<sup>155</sup> Corrie Ten Boom, with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1971), 197-199, 208-209.

<sup>156</sup> Respondent One, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

<sup>157</sup> Respondent Eight, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

<sup>158</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Week Six Questions. October 8, 2017.

of doing just that. I therefore was careful only to ask four questions at the end of the Reflection Journal – what essentially fit on one side of one page. I did not think that this would be too much to ask.<sup>159</sup>

The first question I asked was: “Have you had any big ‘take away’ from this sermon series? If so, please share it.” As was to be expected, the answers given here were of a wide variety. Respondent Seven spectacularly summed up the key idea of the project with her answer here: “That being a Christian takes much discipline on a daily basis to connect w/God.”<sup>160</sup> Similarly, Respondent Twelve showed that she had caught the idea of this series:

Yes! I’ve realized that my spiritual discipline seems to wax and wane in cycles that coincide with how intentional I am about it. (Conversely, how distracted I am with everything else.) I’d like to find ways to ingrain the habits of prayer and study in my life so deeply that I’d be as aware of their absence as I am of the absence of my morning coffee!<sup>161</sup>

Respondent Fourteen also caught upon the idea of the need for a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ with her answer: “I feel I’m getting closer to what Jesus wants me to do, e.g. having close personnel (sic) relationship with him. I’m also encouraged by this series to spread the word to others about Jesus.”<sup>162</sup> Each of these answers greatly encouraged me and made me feel as if I had perhaps accomplished something good with this thesis-project.

A variety of other answers were also given to this question, with one interesting pattern emerging: fully seven of the answers given mentioned fasting in some way.

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<sup>159</sup> Apparently, I was wrong, as Respondent Two did not answer any of these questions. No reason was given, and as this person was generally a thoughtful, faithful participant in this project, I suspect he simply did not see the final page. In addition, taciturn Respondent Eleven, continued his practice of only answering half the questions, and then generally only with one-word answers.

<sup>160</sup> Respondent Seven, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>161</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>162</sup> Respondent Fourteen, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.



Respondent Nineteen answered simply “The importance of fasting,”<sup>163</sup> while Respondent Twenty-Two wrote “My biggest was the sermon on fasting. I dearly loved it.”<sup>164</sup> Respondent Twenty-Three added to this by writing “The idea of fasting, something I have never tried.”<sup>165</sup> This bears out some of the reflections given with the questions asked after that particular week’s sermon – that while I went into that week with the lowest expectations, believing that this would be the most difficult hill to climb of the series, nevertheless, it was clearly the message that made the greatest impact upon the congregation as a whole.

A smattering of other answers were given to these questions. Respondent One found that listening and taking notes during a sermon made her a more conscientious worshipper.<sup>166</sup> Respondent Sixteen wrote that like “everyone,” she lets “time” and busyness keep her from growing in the faith and from practicing the spiritual disciplines.<sup>167</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, Respondent Nine wrote that she did not have any big take-aways from this series, but that she received “many reminders of these disciplines and suggestions for practicing them.”<sup>168</sup> That is better than nothing, I suppose.

The second question I asked referenced one asked in the Initial Information section of the Reflection Journal: “At the beginning of this project, you were asked to rate the vibrancy of your spiritual life. Has that vibrancy waxed or waned as a result of this sermon series?” In asking this question this way, I made a fairly major mistake, as I did

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<sup>163</sup> Respondent Nineteen, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>164</sup> Respondent Twenty-Two, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>165</sup> Respondent Twenty-Three, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>166</sup> Respondent One, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>167</sup> Respondent Sixteen, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>168</sup> Respondent Nine, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

not ask the participants to give me a number on a scale from one to ten as I had before. This made it difficult to score this question, as only eight participants gave a numerical answer to this question. Nevertheless, of those who did, five rated their spiritual lives higher on that scale by anywhere from a half-point to three points; with regard to the other three, one stated that she had over-rated her score as an eight at the beginning, and “even though progress has been made, I feel like my score is now an 8,”<sup>169</sup> and another wrote that her spiritual life had waxed even though she still rated her spiritual life as an eight, as she had before.<sup>170</sup> No respondents reported that their spiritual vibrancy had gone down numerically.

With regard to the other answers given, none reported that their spiritual life had waned, and only four reported that they had the same vibrancy as before. One woman wrote that her spiritual life was poor, and in greater need of improvement than she had realized before,<sup>171</sup> which could certainly be considered a good result, as conviction of sin is certainly one step in the process of sanctification. The rest of the answers were all positive, such as the answer given by Respondent Seventeen, who wrote “I feel my spiritual life is getting stronger. I feel that I have been able to put a plan together that is do-able.”<sup>172</sup> In spite of my flawed way of asking the question, the answers given here, more than anything else, convince me that this thesis-project accomplished what I had hoped.

My penultimate question was about specific changes in spiritual practices that have come about as a result of this series: “What changes have you made to your current

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<sup>169</sup> Respondent Five, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>170</sup> Respondent Thirteen, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>171</sup> Respondent One, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>172</sup> Respondent Seventeen, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

spiritual practices as a result of this sermon series? (e.g., a change to a discipline you were already practicing, or a new discipline you have started.)” Here again, I was pleasantly surprised by the answers given: fully eight of the twenty-two answers given mentioned an increase in the practice of the Scripture disciplines, a fact which greatly encouraged me. Respondent Three wrote that she “Increased reading Scripture,”<sup>173</sup> while Respondent Thirteen wrote that she was “reading Scripture every day.”<sup>174</sup> Respondent Twelve mentioned commitments both in the Scripture disciplines, and the discipline of fasting:

I’ve committed to reading the Bible over the next year and being more faithful in my study of Scripture in general. Also, I am being more intentional with my spiritual discipline and finding ways to incorporate daily prayer and study when I travel and in the mist (sic) of chaos. For example, taking my Bible with me when I travel is a fairly simple way to stay grounded in prayer and study of Scripture. I’m also considering how fasting might be a discipline that I can incorporate. That’s a tough one, though, as far as food (low blood sugar and a history of anxiety-related fasting), so I’m thinking about what kind of fast might be meaningful.<sup>175</sup>

After some somewhat disappointing answers with regard to the congregation’s practice of the Scripture disciplines, it was encouraging to see so many commitments to increasing those practices among my parishioners.

With regard to the other disciplines mentioned specifically in these answers, prayer showed up five times, solitude and silence three times, and fasting and thanksgiving both twice each. Respondent Six gave a typical answer to this question when he wrote “Instead of occasional prayer, Scripture + thanksgiving, I am doing it as a daily event.”<sup>176</sup> Respondent Twenty wrote the profound answer, “I am making an actual

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<sup>173</sup> Respondent Three, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>174</sup> Respondent Thirteen, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>175</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>176</sup> Respondent Six, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

effort to change priority, from life and living, to God 1<sup>st</sup>.”<sup>177</sup> Again, if those were the only positive answers I had received in the whole project, the project itself would still have been a worthwhile endeavor in my mind.

There were a few disappointing answers to this question, however. Taciturn Respondent Eleven reported that he had made no changes at all,<sup>178</sup> as did Respondent Twenty-Two, though she at least held out some hope by writing “None yet.”<sup>179</sup> Three other respondents gave no specific answer regarding changes made to their spiritual practices, including Respondent One, who wrote that she had just watched all six sermons in one week, adding “I can get back to you.”<sup>180</sup> I am not sure what I could have done differently to help these folks who made no positive changes, but it pains me that I have failed them in some way. I will continue to keep them in prayer.

My final question was designed to help me think through next steps: “Do you believe our congregation needs to continue our exploration of the spiritual disciplines? What more do we need to learn?” Ten folks answered that they believed the congregation needed to continue studying the spiritual disciplines in some way, though two of those answered that it “wouldn’t hurt.”<sup>181</sup> Four folks indicated that they were unsure whether more study was needed, with one respondent cryptically answering “You will know by the end of this exercise!”<sup>182</sup> Only one individual specifically wrote that she had had enough of the spiritual disciplines for the time being.<sup>183</sup> It would seem that more study would be in order at some point in the future.

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<sup>177</sup> Respondent Twenty, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>178</sup> Respondent Eleven, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>179</sup> Respondent Twenty-Two, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>180</sup> Respondent One, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>181</sup> Respondents Fifteen and Twenty-One, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>182</sup> Respondent Four, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>183</sup> Respondent Five, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

With regard to the respondents' recommendations for further topics of study, one woman asked for more study of prayer, specifically asking for more instruction on how to pray, and how to do intercessory prayer.<sup>184</sup> Two respondents asked for more instruction on staying the course, staying committed, and staying faithful.<sup>185</sup> Surprisingly, two different respondents asked for more instruction on evangelism, with one specifically writing:

I feel that the Holy Spirit is moving in our congregation. We will get stronger and more enthusiastic about spreading the word in our community (both the church community + Harrison Community.) Joshua your sermons always challenge us to get moving in our church and our community to share the word about Jesus. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Keep encouraging us. It helps get us through the week.<sup>186</sup>

If that does not encourage a pastor to keep going, very little will!

### **Conclusions and Next Steps:**

With all this data now crunched, some questions still remain: what have I learned from all this? How did these outcomes affect my ministry? And what comes next? What kind of follow-up comes after all this?

Firstly, I have had confirmed for me again that the ancient practices of Christianity are still powerful. Conventional wisdom today says that new ideas and new practices are needed to revive and nurture the Church today. One can find all sorts of new programs and gimmicks advertised for pastors and churches today – and to some extent, they may, in fact, be effective. This project has confirmed for me, however, that there is no substitute for these ancient practices of discipleship. When God's people set

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<sup>184</sup> Respondent Twelve, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>185</sup> Respondents Thirteen and Twenty-One, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

<sup>186</sup> Respondent Fourteen, Reflection Journal. Post-Project Questions. October 2017.

their minds to practicing prayer, to reading and learning Scripture, to fasting, worship, and other such disciplines, the Holy Spirit honors those commitments, and moves in power. Spiritual lives gain vibrancy, for the spiritual disciplines are indeed “engines for growth” as they train God’s people for godliness.

I have also learned that it is just as important to teach the “why” as it is to teach the “how” of our faith. Throughout this sermon series, I have tried to teach the answers to both questions – not only why believers must practice these discipleship disciplines, but how to do so. At times, that has made the sermons quite full-bodied. Nevertheless, I believe both questions must be answered if God’s people are going to “get it.” Unless believers catch the vision as to why intentional practice of the disciplines is important, they will not commit; moreover, unless they understand what those disciplines look like in one’s everyday life, little actual progress will be made. God’s people need to know both the why and the how.

This includes having a knowledge of the interplay between God’s work and ours in the process of sanctification. While ultimately, it may be a mystery how Christians are both saved by the grace of Jesus Christ alone, and how at the same time they “work out their salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12), nevertheless, it is important that believers understand that both are, at the same time, true. God saves sinners – and at the same time, God calls sinners to respond to his saving work by living purposefully as his disciplined followers. God calls his people to pray, and yet also prays through them with groans beyond their understanding (Romans 8:26). God calls his people to seek him through the Word, and yet at the same time, God makes that Word powerful and effective, such that it does not return to him void (Isaiah 55:11).

In this way, the why and how of discipleship are linked, for God's people respond to his work of salvation, while at the same time, that work of salvation goes on as God chooses to use his people's efforts for their blessing. This understanding renders two kinds of dangers moot – both the danger of sitting back and expecting God to do all the work of sanctification for his people, and the tyranny of thinking that such work is entirely up to the believer. God's people practice purposeful discipleship because God has acted – and God chooses to use those purposeful acts to sanctify his people. That is good news!

This good news, I believe, must be proclaimed in other congregations and fellowship groups, as well. This is a project that could easily be adapted to other contexts and denominational traditions. The commendation of the spiritual disciplines could be done in a class format, as I did for my first Doctor of Ministry project, or it could be adapted for a short retreat setting, in which time is set aside to practice each discipline. Pastors could also adapt the various foci of sermons to their own contexts, depending on the needs they perceive in their own congregations. After preaching or teaching the basics of the spiritual disciplines – especially the “why” and the “how” of these practices – the rest of the series could be tailored to include however many disciplines the pastor believes would be helpful. Prayer and the Scripture disciplines should probably always be included, but any number of the other disciplines could be included, as well. Proclaiming a purposeful, intentional practice of the faith is something each and every pastor should be doing, no matter the context or denominational tradition. Pastors do a disservice to their congregations if they fail to do this.

For this reason, I will, of course, continue to preach, teach, and commend the spiritual disciplines to my congregation. One six-week sermon series, while powerful, is not enough to ensure that these things are taught and understood. One sermon series, even for a Doctor of Ministry thesis-project, is by no means a panacea for a congregation's struggles with flabby spirituality and general malaise. Thankfully, I never expected it to be so. I always knew that would only be one step among many. I simply rejoice that it has been such a positive one.

Still, in the future I plan to preach and teach more on sanctification, discipleship, and the intentional practice of the spiritual disciplines. While I do not believe that another sermon series specifically dedicated to the spiritual disciplines would be in order, nor perhaps would a class focusing on these practices be appropriate, nevertheless, I do believe I will find ways to weave these topics into other series and times of teaching. I do believe another book study relating to discipleship and the disciplines during one of the congregation's normal summer studies would be helpful. I could also see myself designing a series on a particular discipline, such as prayer. Continued teaching on fasting, which seemed to catch the imaginations of so many participants, also seems to be in order for the future. There is much to build on from this project, and I will definitely listen to the voice of the Spirit as I plan future events.

This thesis-project has been a monumental undertaking, and while, due to the death of my father earlier this year, my passion for it may not have been as vital as for previous Doctor of Ministry projects, I still am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to do it. I have learned a great deal, and I believe my congregation has been blessed



because of it. Throughout the project, I have seen God's hand at work; the credit is therefore his, and his alone. To him alone be the glory!

APPENDIX A:  
A SAMPLE REFLECTION JOURNAL

# REFLECTION JOURNAL

Dear Friend –

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my Doctorate of Ministry project for Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary! I COULD NOT DO THIS WITHOUT YOU! A DMin thesis project is designed to be done in the midst of an actual congregation, in the hopes that it would answer real life questions for the benefit of the Church of Jesus Christ. In this way, you are helping me answer questions that will hopefully make a difference in our church, and perhaps in other churches, as well.

A few words before you begin:

- 1.) There are some basic identity questions on the first page of this journal, I am not asking for your name. So, do PLEASE answer these honestly. PLEASE also know that, while I may quote from your journal in the context of my thesis, **all your answers will be strictly confidential**. In other words, **no one will ever know who wrote what**.
- 2.) My thesis project consists of a sermon series on the classic spiritual disciplines. As such, it would be very helpful to me if you could commit to attending all six Sundays of the series, to hear all six sermons. If, for some reason, you are unable to attend one of those Sundays, I would appreciate it if you listened to the sermon on YouTube later. If you are unable to do this, simply skip the questions pertaining to the sermon(s) you missed.
- 3.) This journal is designed in a certain way. There are some questions that I would like you to answer *before* the sermon series. Next, there are open-ended reflection pages which I would like for you to do after each Sunday service. Finally, there are a few questions which I would like you to answer *after the series is finished*. Again, **please be honest!** This information is no good to me if it is false!

Lastly, THANK YOU AGAIN! I could not do this without you! May the Lord bless you as you complete this journal, and may He use this project to grow us all in faith! To Him alone be the glory!

In Christ's Love,

Rev. Joshua Long

### **Initial Information**

*Reminder: All personal information will be kept confidential! This information is necessary, however, for my paper.*

- 1.) Gender:
- 2.) Age:
- 3.) How long have you been connected with First Presbyterian Church?
- 4.) Did you participate in Rev. Long's summer class on the spiritual disciplines in 2015?
- 5.) Have you read about or studied the spiritual disciplines in other settings? If so, please elaborate:
- 6.) On a scale from 1-10, with 1 being worst and 10 being best, how would you rate how vibrant your spiritual life is? Why?
- 7.) Which of the following disciplines do you currently practice *regularly*? (Please mark all that apply):
  - Prayer\_\_\_\_\_
  - Study of Scripture \_\_\_\_\_
  - Fasting \_\_\_\_\_
  - Silence \_\_\_\_\_
  - Solitude \_\_\_\_\_
  - Worship \_\_\_\_\_
  - Thanksgiving \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

8.) Of the disciplines which you practice regularly, which do you practice daily?

Which do you practice weekly?

Which do you practice at least monthly?

9.) How do you hope to benefit from this project?

## Week One Questions

*Please complete these questions after the first sermon (September 3).*

- 1.) Why is it important to be *intentional* in our relationship with God?
- 2.) How are you currently being intentional in your spiritual life?
- 3.) What does it mean to be godly? Is this something you desire in your life?

## **Week Two Questions**

*Please complete these questions after the second sermon (September 10).*

1.) Why is prayer a necessary discipline for all Christians?

2.) Describe your current prayer life:

How often do you pray?

Where do you pray? (Do you have a "prayer closet"?)

When do you pray?

With whom do you pray regularly?

What tools/aids do you use in your prayers?

3.) In what ways do you need to grow in your prayer life?

4.) What one step will you take *this week* to accomplish this?

### **Week Three Questions**

*Please complete these questions after the third sermon (September 17).*

1.) Why is the study of Scripture a necessary discipline for all Christians?

2.) Describe your current practices with Scripture:

How often do you read the Bible?

How often do you meditate upon Scripture?

Are you involved in Sunday School? Bible Study? Some other study group?

What tools/aids do you use in your study of Scripture?

Are you currently working to memorize Scripture? If so, how?

3.) In what ways do you need to grow in the Scripture disciplines?

4.) What on step will you take *this week* to accomplish this?



### **Week Four Questions**

*Please complete these questions after the fourth sermon (September 24).*

- 1.) Why is fasting an important discipline for Christians to practice?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2.) How often do you fast?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3.) What kinds of fasting do you currently practice? (E.g., Lenten fast, technology fast, fasting for discernment, Daniel fast, juice fast, total fast, etc.)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 4.) How could you grow in the practice of this discipline?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 5.) What one step will you take *this week* to accomplish this?

## Week Five Questions

*Please complete these questions after the fifth sermon (October 1).*

- 1.) Why are silence and solitude important disciplines for Christians to practice today?
- 2.) How do you currently practice these disciplines? How often do you practice them?
- 3.) Have you ever taken a spiritual retreat? If so, please elaborate.
- 4.) How can you grow in your practice of the disciplines of solitude and silence?
- 5.) What one step will you take *this week* to accomplish this?

## Week Six Questions

*Please complete these questions after the sixth sermon (October 8).*

- 1.) Why are worship and thanksgiving important disciplines for believers to practice?
- 2.) How do you currently practice these disciplines?
- 3.) How can you grow in your practice of the disciplines of worship and thanksgiving?
- 4.) What one step will you take *this week* to accomplish this?

## Post-Project Questions

*Please answer these questions at the end of the sermon series.*

- 1.) Have you had any big “take away” from this sermon series? If so, please share it.
- 2.) At the beginning of this project, you were asked to rate the vibrancy of your spiritual life. Has that vibrancy waxed or waned as a result of this sermon series? How would you rate your spiritual life today?
- 3.) What changes have you made to your current spiritual practices as a result of this sermon series? (e.g., a change to a discipline you were already practicing, or a new discipline you have started.)
- 4.) Do you believe our congregation needs to continue our exploration of the spiritual disciplines? What more do we need to learn?

## APPENDIX B:

### SERMONS

*Nota Bene:* These sermons have been transcribed from a video recording of the sermons, and are not footnoted. Titles, accompanying Scripture passages, and dates have been added for convenience.

**“Engines of Growth, Training in Godliness” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 1 Timothy 4:6-16) – September 3, 2017.**

Well, as I said at the beginning of the service, we are starting a new sermon series today. This is part of my work for my Doctorate of Ministry degree. Remember, everybody that is working to get one of these degrees has to do a project - something that addresses a need within the context of the church, the congregation. When I started this degree program back in the summer of 2014, we were just beginning to go through some tough times here at the church. Some of you may remember that time. There was just a malaise in the congregation. We were in a serious funk during that time and I was not honestly sure what to do to address that particular problem. I was not sure what to do to help us regain our vitality and our passion. And going along with that, there had been several instances along my time as a pastor, when an individual would come to me with a very similar kind of problem in their own spiritual life. They'd come with a problem they usually didn't quite know how to put into words. They knew that they were saved, knew they had a relationship with Jesus, they were doing all the things that you were "supposed to do". They were coming to church, listening to the sermons, getting involved in church activities, and yet, somehow none of that ever seemed to get down deep, to make a difference in their lives. They knew that there was something more, something that they were missing but they didn't know what it was and they did not know how to get to that "something more."

So, as I did my reading, and my studying, and my writing, and going to class, I began to wonder, "Is there a way that I can address both of these problems in the corporate context and individually for the people who were struggling with these types of

things?” In my first year, I hit upon a topic that I actually studied before but had forgotten about - the classic Christian spiritual disciplines. Some of you may remember in the summer of 2015, I actually taught an eight-week class on these disciplines, which was received very well. People seemed to enjoy learning about these different practices.

Well, we’re taking them back up today and looking at them as a whole congregation in our worship time – what these disciplines are, how they can help us, why they are important. Because I think these ancient practices can be engines for growth in our Christian life; they can train us to become the godly people that the Lord wants us to be to be, to be the godly congregation that he is calling us to be.

So, the first question - what the heck is a spiritual discipline? Some of you may never have heard that term. What exactly are we talking about here? Well, John Ortberg – we studied two of his books last summer – writes, “A spiritual discipline is any activity I do by direct effort that helps me do what I cannot do by direct effort.” Or to put it a little more clearly, any activity that can help me to gain power to live life the way Jesus taught and modeled it. A spiritual discipline is a training activity, an intentional training activity that we do in a disciplined way, to help us engage in our relationship with Christ, so that we can become like him.

I realize, some of you are already turned off because you don’t like that word “discipline”. It’s a dirty word, in today’s culture. Some of you are remembering when you were young and got into trouble, and you were disciplined by your parents. Others of you may be thinking, “I may have been disciplined as a kid, why do I have to discipline myself as an adult? I don’t want to discipline myself. I like to have a kind of mushy life

where I can get out of things I really don't want to do and still feel good about the fact that I got out of something I didn't want to do. I don't want to feel guilty for that."

The thing is, disciples are people who practice disciplines. Those two words come from the same root. By definition, a disciple is somebody who disciplines their life according to the pattern that their teacher, their master, has laid down for them. Disciples arrange their life in such a way that they follow the discipline, the pattern, the master lays down. They train themselves, they live intentionally, to become like their master. Our master, our teacher, of course, is Jesus Christ. So as his disciples, we are called to discipline our lives in such a way that we are training for godliness, as Paul says. We are becoming Christ-like.

Now, we are not doing this to earn our way into heaven. I feel I need to say this over and over again. Christ has already taken care of us getting into heaven. That's what the cross and the empty tomb are about. He died on the cross, he rose again from the dead so that we could be saved. If we believe in him, that is a fact, a reality for us. But because of that, because he went to the cross, because he rose again from the dead, because he is so kind, so forgiving, so gracious, so loving, because he has captured our hearts, because he is the passion of our lives, therefore we as his disciples must live intentionally according to the pattern, the discipline he has laid down for us. And that's a full-time job. There is no such thing as a part-time disciple. That doesn't exist. It is not possible to live your life as a true disciple in a haphazard way, picking it up when you feel like it. That's not going to work. Disciples are people who are committed to living their life for their master, committed to follow his discipline.



Now, what kind of activities are we talking about here? What kind of disciplines are we called to have in our life? Well, think about the way Jesus lived. Think about the kinds of things he did. He prayed. He was devoted to the Scriptures; he taught them, he read them, he knew them, he used them. He taught us about fasting. He withdrew to solitary places where he could be quiet and alone with the Lord. He was disciplined about worshiping, about giving thanks. All of these are disciplines we are called to have in our lives so we can train ourselves to become godly, Christ-like people.

We're going to be looking at all of these disciplines I mentioned over the next five weeks, because when we do these kinds of things, when we are intentional about practicing these types of disciplines, what we are doing is opening ourselves up to the Lord so that he can really go to work on us as a congregation and as individuals. It's like hoisting a sail to catch the wind so that we can be moved along closer and closer to Jesus Christ – so that we can be transformed, so that we can have as much of his grace and love and joy and peace in our lives as possible.

Again, we have to be intentional, purposeful, about practicing these kinds of disciplines. This is what Paul was talking about in our Scriptures today. He talks about, as (the children's sermon volunteer) pointed out, about running a race, the kinds of things athletes do in their lives. "Do you not know," he says to the Corinthians, "that in a race, all the runners run, but only one receives the prize. So in your race of faith, run so that you may obtain that prize. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath. We are doing so to gain an imperishable prize. So don't run aimlessly. I don't box as one beating the air but I discipline my body, I keep it under control, lest after preaching, I should find myself disqualified." (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

He tells Timothy, “Train yourself for Godliness. For while bodily training is of some value, Godliness is a value in every way” (1 Timothy 4:7b-8a). Think about it: you would never wake up one day and say, “You know what? I think I’ll go and run a half marathon today.” Not unless you wanted to fail spectacularly or maybe, end up in the emergency room. Nobody would do that. You would wake up and say, “You know what? I’m going to set a goal to run a half marathon and then over the next weeks or months, maybe even the next year, you would train your body, you would train your mind, to be able to run that kind of race. This is what we are talking about here. Nobody wakes up and says, “You know what? I think I’m going to start playing Chopin today on the piano.” That’s not going to happen. You wake up and say, “I think I want to learn how to play the piano because I want to learn how to play this Chopin piece – and then you start to practice, you start to train. You train your brain, you train your eyes, you train your fingers to know what to do to play that kind of a piece.

And that practice, that training, is not always fun, is it? Saying “yes” to practice and training means saying “no” to a whole host of other things that might be more fun in the moment. Saying “yes” to training for a half-marathon might mean on cold and dizzily days like we had yesterday, you might have to go out and run. Or on hot, humid days like we had a week ago, you still might have to run a certain amount to train for the race. Why on earth would anyone do that? For the prize. For the opportunity of crossing that finish line, of winning that race. Or for the opportunity to play that piece at a recital or at a concert. That’s why you train.

The Corinthians would have understood the athletic imagery that Paul was using because Corinth was the sight of the Isthmian games, which were second only to the

Olympics in Ancient Greece – the second most prestigious games. Every three years, people came to Corinth and practiced and competed in a whole host of events and in every event, the athlete would receive what was called a *stefanos*, a crown of victory, usually made out of laurel leaves. (That’s where we get our phrase, “resting on your laurels.”) When the Olympics were in Athens back in 2004, along with the gold, silver, and bronze metals, you might remember they also got a crown of laurel leaves on their head as an homage to the ancient Olympics. They competed for that crown.

Now the thing is, as Paul says, when your prize is a crown of laurel leaves, after a while, what’s going to happen? Those leaves are going to fade, they’re going to wither, they’re going to fall apart. But we are training, we are practicing, we are disciplining ourselves for a prize that will never fade, never fall apart, that will never tarnish. We are training and practicing for the crown of life. Because we are running a race, we’re running the race of faith. Jesus Christ through his work on the cross, has sat us on the straight and narrow way and has said, “Keep your eye on the prize, fixed on the goal”, which is fellowship with God, which is eternal life with Jesus Christ. He says, “Run that race, stay on that straight and narrow, keep going forward in your faith toward that goal”, and to run that race, we have to train ourselves.

Like (the children’s sermon volunteer) said, we can’t be distracted by all of the other things that try and get our attention. It does no good to be flabby spiritually, or to take our eyes off the prize. We need to train ourselves for godliness; we need to stay in shape spiritually, and engage in the process. We need to pray and spend time in scripture. We need to fast; we need to worship; we need to give thanks. We need to do all these kinds of things because godliness is a value in every way. And by practicing these

disciplines, we are opening ourselves up to greater fellowship with Jesus Christ, to greater work of the Holy Spirit in us and among us because the Holy Spirit is the one who gives us the strength to run this race of faith.

There's the key to all of this: remembering why we practice these disciplines. Why we are training our self for godliness? For the prize, for that greater end of having greater fellowship with God. Having that spiritual vitality in our lives and in our congregation. Growing our faith, growing our relationship with Christ. When we forget that that's the reason we are doing things, that's when these disciplines can become like drudgery. When we forget why we are practicing prayer, why we are practicing the spiritual disciplines, why we are fasting, they can become burdens to us – because we think we have to do them, just for their own sake.

Again, think about the examples I just used. Before somebody goes out and runs that half marathon, if she's smart, she'll probably go warm up, she'll probably stretch her muscles. But when the race begins, we don't give a medal to her for how well she stretches. It's not about how good she does at stretching, how well she does it, how long she does it. The stretching is a means for her to limber up her muscles, to warm up her muscles to give her endurance so that she can run the race better.

Similarly, Beth, our fantastic pianist – she remains a fantastic pianist by practicing. I was talking to her before and sometimes she still goes back to practicing the old-fashioned scales. Now, you'll notice, she did not sit down at her prelude and show us how well she can play scales. If she were giving a recital, she wouldn't sit down and play scales. It's not about how well she can do those warm up exercises. Playing the scales keeps her fingers nimble and strong so she can play longer and with greater precision.

That's what we're talking about here with these disciplines that we practice. It's not about how many minutes you pray or how many verses of scripture you read each day or how many days out of the year you fast, or how exactly you practice those fasting. All of those are means towards greater vitality towards spiritual life, greater fellowship with Jesus Christ, greater godliness in gratitude for what God has done for us.

Sometimes we get caught up, though, in the details and we forget why we are doing these things. But the Holy Spirit is here among us; the Holy Spirit desires us to have greater joy and peace and vitality. The Holy Spirit desires us that we know Jesus Christ better. The Holy Spirit desires that we run this race well, that we cross that finish line and gain that crown of life. All of this power is available to us if we keep our eyes on Jesus, if we lift our hearts of to him, if we engage in a relationship with him and these disciplines can help us do exactly that. They can help us keep in step with the spirit. When we are intentional about practicing prayer; when we are intentional about studying the scriptures; when we are intentional about disciplining our appetites, through fasting; when we are intentional about spending time alone, and in quiet with God or about training our minds to give thanks in all circumstances, to worship each and every day; then we are training ourselves to be better runners in this race of faith so we can experience greater joy in Jesus Christ and gain that crown of life.

Now the world will tell us we're ridiculous when we do this. They'll call us all kinds of names: Holy-rollers, fanatics, old-fashioned, crazy. So what? We're not living our lives to get the approval of the world. We're living our lives before an audience of one. And we already have God's approval. He's already proven that we are important to

us, that he loves us. While we were sinners, he sent his son Jesus Christ to live and to die for us. We know we have that security, in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, in response, because we know this to be the case, we intentionally discipline ourselves to run the race for him, to become more and more like him, to experience greater and greater fellowship with him and over the next five weeks, we're going to look at some of these disciplines more in depth so that we can learn to practice them well. I do hope that you will come every single week to hear the next five sermons or if you have to miss one, that you'll catch it later on YouTube. And I hope you use these journals. They don't just help me with my work, I think they will help all of us engage in this process of learning about these disciplines and how they can help us in our Christian life. For these are the kinds of things that Jesus himself practiced, and if we want to become more like him, then we would do well to practice these disciplines, as well. It is possible to gain this vitality in our church. It is possible to gain this vibrancy in our personal lives, as well, if we simply turn on these engines for growth. Hallelujah! To God alone be the glory.

Let us pray: God, we thank you for these tools that you have given to us. We thank you for the promise of vitality, of joy, of peace. We thank you, Lord, for the call to run the race well, to keep our eyes fixed on you, to gain the crown of life. And we pray that over the next several weeks, you will give us the grace to engage more and more with you. And now Lord, as we prepare to come to your table, we ask that you would nourish us in our faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**“When You Pray . . .” (Matthew 6:5-13; James 5:13-20) – September 10, 2017.**

Well, as I said at the beginning of the service, we are in a sermon series on spiritual disciplines and last week, I introduced what these spiritual disciplines are, why we do them, what they are for – these tools, these “engines for growth”, as I like to call them, these training exercises for us as we run the race of faith. These are the kinds of things that we see Jesus practicing in the Gospels, which I believe that we also, in our own lives and in our church, need to practice, as well, - in a disciplined, intentional way. That when we do the kinds of the things that we read Jesus doing, then we become more Christ-like. We have greater joy, greater fellowship, greater power, in our lives and in our church. These disciplines are means toward greater vitality, greater joy, greater godliness.

Today we’re looking at the first of these spiritual disciplines, one which I call “the Big Two” – two spiritual disciplines we’ll look at at this week and next week, that I think all of us need to be practicing. There are a whole host of these disciplines, not all appropriate for every one of us, but every one of us needs to practice the discipline of prayer. I don’t think you can be a Christian in any meaningful sense of that term if you don’t spend time in the practice of prayer – because, of course, Christianity, at its very heart, as (the children’s sermon volunteer) was pointing out in our children’s sermon, is a relationship - a relationship with God. How can you have a relationship with somebody if you don’t communicate with them? That is what prayer is at its very core; it is communication with God.

Pastor Tim Keller defines prayer as, “Our personable, communicative response to our knowledge of God.” In other words, communicating personally with a God we know

personally and then listening to what he has to say in response. This is part of what makes the Christian Gospel such incredible good news, that we can know God, that God knows us and he desires to be known *by* us in the same way, that he has shown and proven over and over again how much he desires a relationship with each one of us. He even became a human being to have a relationship with us. He died on the cross to have a relationship with us. He rose again from the dead. He sent us his Holy Spirit. He's given us his written word, all so that we can know him in the way that we are known by him.

He invites us into a continual communication through the discipline of prayer. He calls us to "pray without ceasing." And, you know, we see this principle in our earthly relationships as well, don't we? That the more we spend time with people, the more communication we have with people, the better the relationship is. If you met a new friend and found out that she was married but that her husband lived 250 miles away and she never saw him and she never called him and she never wrote him or never even texted him but she swore up and down that she had just the best relationship with her husband, you might scratch your head just a little bit and begin to wonder about that. Of course, I realize it depends on the husband, but all joking aside, that is not the recipe for a good marriage relationship. It's not a good recipe for a good brother/sister/friend relationship. Any kind of relationship – you have to spend time with people, you've got to communicate with people.

The same is true in our relationship with God. How can we say we love God if we don't spend time in prayer with him? How can we say that God is our number-one priority in life? How can we say we trust him, we follow him, if we are weak in this area of prayer. It just doesn't compute. We need to be disciplined and intentional in spending



time in prayer. Prayer is a means for us, a tool for us, to have greater depth, greater maturity, greater fellowship with God and therefore, it leads to greater godliness in the way we live our lives. Prayer is part of our training in this running the race of faith. And I realize this may not be the way you are used to thinking about prayer. This may be a new idea for you of prayer – as a means to greater depth in your relationship with God. You may not have been taught about prayer in this way. No one may have ever talked to you about prayer in this way. You may have thought of prayer more as a way to get stuff from God. You may have been taught of prayer almost as more of an incantation that if you say the right words in the right way with the right depth of feeling behind them, then God will be bound to give you the blessings that you are asking of him, almost as if God were some kind of cosmic slot machine. Insert your prayer and pull the lever and boom, out come all of the answers and the blessing that you've been looking for.

A lot people are taught about prayer in this way even though that's not at all how the Bible teaches prayer. Look at what Jesus tells us in our first Scripture reading for today, from the Sermon on the Mount. The first thing he says is when you pray, remember who you are talking to - you are talking to God. You are (not) addressing, you are not talking at all of the other people who might be overhearing your prayer, and if you are praying for the purpose of impressing other people who might be overhearing what you are praying, if you are thinking how much they will admire you for the lovely prayer that you happen to be saying, then that's all you're going to get out of that prayer is their admiration. God will not be honored by prayers that are not really addressed to him.

The second thing Jesus says, which may surprise us, is that in prayer, it's not about the words. Prayer is not about getting the words right. God does not listen more to

prayers that are eloquent and flowery and beautiful and full of “thee’s” and “thou’s” and “thy’s” – you know< that *holy language*. You’ve heard people, they put on their “holy prayer voice” and they start all of the sudden talking like an Elizabethan, you know with “beholds” and “forsooths” and all of that. God doesn’t listen more to those kinds of prayers than he does to other kinds of halting, stumbling prayers where you’re tripping over the words and you’re not really saying things beautifully. He hears all prayers that are truly addressed to him, in a desire to spend time in fellowship with him, enjoying his presence. He hears all prayers that are sincerely prayed to him, whether they’re eloquent or not.

And so that makes sense of the next thing that Jesus says, which is the environment for our prayers is important. When you pray, Jesus says, go into your room, or in the old King James, go into your “closet,” and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret and your Father, who sees all things that happen in secret, will reward you. This where we get the term “prayer closet” from. Some of you may have heard that term. And I have seen this play out over and over again, all the times that I have hosted a prayer vigil here at the Church. Those of you that have never taken part in one of our prayer vigils, it’s usually a 12-hour period of time in which we literally keep vigil here at the church. Throughout that time, there’s somebody here spending time in prayer, lifting our church, lifting up our community, our nation, our shut-ins, our sick, all of those things. People generally sign up for a half-hour slot and then come in in a rotation. And every time we host one of these things, there’s always somebody who comes to me at the beginning, and they’re really nervous, because they say, “I just don’t know if I can pray for 30 whole minutes. I have never prayed for 30 whole minutes in a row in my life, and I

just don't think I can do it." And I say, "You can do it, just give it a try, give it a shot." And every single time somebody says that to me, when I then bring the next person in who signed up for the next half-hour, and I quietly knock on the door and let them know that their relief has come, they kind of look up at me with a startled look on their face and they say, "That could not have been 30 minutes. I'm only half way through the stuff I wanted to pray about" and I usually say, "Well, maybe so-and-so will let you stay here and finish."

But the reason is the environment has been prepared. Prayer has been exercised not haphazardly, but as a discipline. First of all, what they've done is they set aside time on their calendar for prayer and for nothing else. They've made an appointment to spend time in the presence of God. Too often we fail to put it on our calendar. We think, "if I have time, I'll get to it." Well, guess what? It's not going to happen; we have to make that appointment.

The next thing that's happened is they've come to a quiet environment where nobody can interrupt them. They've gone into their prayer closet, the space that they've set aside for prayer. They've prepared their mind, they've gotten into the frame of mind that I'm going to go and spend time with God. and so I'm going to set aside all the zillion other things that I need to do. That'll be for after this half hour. I'm going to focus on what the task is for this half-hour. And then all the materials are there for them. I usually prepare prayer guides, prayer lists, things you can pray through in those 30 minutes – they're there for you. And there's worshipful music, if that helps people, and the Bible is there and all kinds of books of prayers. All of that is provided so that we can really practice prayer as a discipline, that's not just flopping down in a chair and expecting

magic to happen. Too often, that's how we pray. We don't prepare, we don't discipline ourselves to really pay attention to what we're doing.

And this is what I'm urging us all to do regularly, every day, each and every week: To set aside time, even if it's just 5, 10, 30, or 60 minutes. The length doesn't necessarily matter, but to set aside time each day and to make prayer a priority, to practice that discipline, block that time off. Turn off the television, turn off the radio, turn off the phone, put it in another room. Take it off the hook, if you are still one of those people that has a landline. I know there's probably a couple of you out there, take it off the hook, find a private quiet place where you won't be interrupted, get in that frame of mind and then have your notebook or your journal, (it helps to write out your prayers sometimes), have your Bible, have your prayer list, whatever you need to spend time with the Lord. Be intentional about nurturing your relationship with the Lord, because he is worth it. He became a human being for us, he died for us, he's worth setting aside some time each day to spend in fellowship with him.

We need to practice the discipline of prayer in private, but we also need to practice the discipline of prayer corporately, with other believers, as the Church of Jesus Christ. Did you notice what (the liturgist) read for us, the pattern of prayer that we often call the Lord's Prayer? The first two words that Jesus give to us, when he says, "When you pray, pray like this, 'Our Father', not my father, our father." Jesus expects us to pray together as a body of believers as the church.

Similarly, in our second reading from James, James tell us if you are sick, if you are in crises, if you are going through a terrible, horrible rough time, you need to pray and you need to call the church together to pray. You need to call the elders to anoint you and

lay on hands and pray for you. Incidentally, this why every month, after the second service downstairs in the chapel, we have a Healing Service, where a couple elders are there, and we offer the laying on the hands and anointing and prayer for anybody that wants it. All you've got to do is show up, and, by the way, that's available whenever - all you have to do is ask and we'll get a couple of elders to anoint you and lay on hands and pray, because we believe that the prayers joined together of God's people are powerful and effective, like James says. This is why as a community of faith, as a body of believers, we need to pray together. This why over the past four or five years, I've been working so hard to try to beef up our prayer ministries together and I love that our Monday night chapel prayer time is starting up again tomorrow. I love that we have a prayer chain. I love that next month, a new women's bible study and prayer group are going to start up on Thursday mornings called "Heart to Heart". If you are a woman in the church or if you have neighbors who are women who are retired or who have time free on Thursday mornings, I hope you'll come and join us. It's going to be a wonderful opportunity.

The prayers of God's righteous people together are powerful and effective and if you're not involved in some kind of group, if it's a small group or a family or whatever, where as believers you come and pray together, I hope you will think about going to one of these, or starting another prayer group at our church at a time that is convenient for you. Even if it scares you to death to thinking about having to pray out loud, in front of other people who might judge you, so what? We need to pray together as God's people because again, God is worth it.

But besides disciplining ourselves to pray in private and besides disciplining ourselves to pray corporately, we also need to make time in our lives for the spontaneous prayers because again, God is always with us, isn't he? We're never alone - God is always with us and so at all times, all throughout the day, all throughout our lives, we have this incredible privilege, this incredible opportunity, to lift up spontaneous prayers to the Lord and we have this balance in our earthly relationships as well. We have those times where we happen to be with other people and we enjoy seeing them and talking with them but we also, if the person is important to us, we go out of our way to schedule time with those people so that we can nurture the relationship. Both types of time and communication are important and the same is true with the Lord - remembering to make space in our lives for him, remembering to practice the presence of God, that we can talk to him, ask for his help, thank him for the good things that are happening - praise him just for being our God.

We spend time with God all the time, and so often we forget about it. So often we don't acknowledge it when you get in your car and you get on the road you can say, "Lord, I need you to go with me on this journey. Put your angels before and behind my car." When you're going about your business and you hear sirens in the distance, you can lift up this wonderful discipline I practice that I learned from my folks, to just stop what I'm doing and say, "Lord, go with them. Keep those emergency responders safe. I don't know what the situation is but bless them Lord. Help them to do their job well and to help whoever it is that is in need." When something wonderful happens to you - learning to pause and to give thanks to God for that. When something horrible happens - learning to pause and to say, "God, I need your help with this."

God's always with us, and learning to pray without ceasing (which I think this is what that means all throughout our day), remembering God is there and lifting up our praises and our prayers to him, making him a part of our lives if we learn to practice our prayers in this way, to discipline ourselves in this way, I think it can be a true engine for growth personally in our relationships with God and corporately as a church. That's what this project is all about for me, training ourselves in godliness, to become like Christ, who practiced the discipline of prayer himself.

I know some of you may be with me here in this. I know I may have persuaded some of you, but I also know some of you are sitting there and you're saying, "Joshua, that sounds really great but I'm just not good at prayer. I've tried; I never know what to say. I've tried; my mind just wanders. It's hard for me to pay attention. It's hard for me to pray for any period of time. I just get busy and that gets crowded out of my schedule." And you know what? I wish I had a catch-all answer for you. I wish I had the magic bullet that can solve all of these problems of prayer. I don't, but I can tell you this from my own experience - prayer is something you can only learn by doing it. Like so many skills in in life, prayer has to be learned through praying. It's not really something you can learn from someone else, although someone else can teach you. It's something you have to learn on your own and we have to be willing to push through that frustration; to stick with this, to say, "This is important enough to me; Jesus is important enough to me, that I'm willing to push through the discomfort to become a better pray-er."

I can also tell you this, remember God is always with us, and God is a good Father who knows how to give good gifts to his children. And God desires that we grow in our relationship with him, so this is something we can ask for his help with. He's not

standing up there glowering at us, judging us and saying, “Well, when you get better at this, then maybe I’ll smile on you, but right now, those prayers, there’re just not great.”

No! Do parents do that with toddlers? “Oh, you walked three steps - whew. I’ll smile and praise you when you can walk across the whole room, because frankly, that ain’t gonna do it.” No! If we toddle and stumble in our prayers, he’s a good Father who delights in that and says, “Come on, try it again.”

So, we can go to God and we can say in all honesty, “Lord, I’m not good at prayer but I want to learn to be better at it. Help me with this, Lord. Lord, I want to know you better, Lord I want to be able to recognize your voice when you are talking to me. I want to have greater fellowship with you. I want to experience that greater joy, that greater power, that greater wisdom, that greater godliness. I want to be one of those prayer warriors who delights you with their prayers, who prays often. I don’t want prayer, Lord, just to be my spare tire that I pull out in times of emergency; I want prayer to be my steering wheel, to guide me in my life. Prayer, Lord – I know it feels like I’m busy for it but I know I’m too busy *not* to pray, that I have too many important things going on in my life not to lift them up to you, not to ask for your guidance, your wisdom, your blessing. Lord, show me how to do this better. Teach me, send people to me who can guide me, send resources to me so I can learn how to do it better.” Do you really think God won’t delight in those prayers? Do you really think he won’t delight in answering those prayers for us? Of course he will! All we have to do is ask, and then trust that he will answer – and then keep disciplining ourselves to spend that time with him, to push through the discomfort and the frustration, to put in the patience and the effort, knowing



he is worth all of our efforts, that he is worthy of our discipline, that he is worthy of struggling to keep in step with his spirit who is at work among us all the time.

So, let us pray without ceasing. Let us be disciplined in praying in private and praying together. Let us be disciplined in keeping those appointments with God and in spontaneously lifting up our prayers to him throughout the day, for the prayers of God's people are powerful and effective. Hallelujah! To him alone be the glory.

Let us pray: God, we thank you for the good news, that you hear our prayers, that you desire our prayers. We thank you for the promise that you hear our prayers and answer with what is right and good. Lord, teach us to be faithful and disciplined and to pray without ceasing. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

**“Storing Up the Word in Our Hearts (Psalm 119:1-16; 2 Timothy 3:10-4:8) –  
September 17, 2017.**

Some of you who are friends with me on FB know how much I love the Christian “news” site *The Babylon Bee*. For those of you that not on Facebook, or have not found *The Babylon Bee*, it’s basically the Christian version of *The Onion*, a satirical news site that writes humorous spoof “articles” lampooning certain aspects of our life – only, because it’s written from a Christian perspective, the articles lampoon certain aspects about church life, about the Christian life. The other day I saw an “article” which fits in so well with what we’re talking about today. The headline was, “Man Sitting Literally Three Feet Away From Bible Asks God To Speak To Him.” And here’s some of the article:

*“According to sources, local man Steve Harrison, fervently prayed Thursday, that the Lord would speak to him and make his will for the man’s life clear, all while sitting literally three feet away from God’s word, as revealed in the Bible. ‘Father God, if you could just speak to me, Father God’. Harrison prayed as prophetic words sat just on the other end of the table at which he was seated . . . At publishing time, sources had confirmed that a frustrated Harrison eventually gave up on trying hear God’s words and resigned himself to just reading the Bible instead.”*

We laugh because we recognized the truth that “article” was trying to say. We laugh because it hits home. And so, as we continue this sermon series on the spiritual disciplines, we’re taking up today the second of what I call the “the Big Two disciplines”: The reading, the studying, the meditating upon the word of God in Scripture. And like with the discipline of prayer which we saw last week, this is a discipline that I believe is

absolutely necessary for all Christians. In fact, I don't think you can really be a Christian if you are not spending time reading and studying the Word of God in Scripture.

That's why I call these the "Big Two". Not all the spiritual disciplines are appropriate for all believers, but all believers need to be spending time in prayer, and need to be spending time in the Word. Because again, at its very heart, Christianity is about having a relationship with God – having a relationship with the One who created us, the One who died for us, the One who rules the world. How can we have a relationship with God if we are not studying the Word that God has written down for us? We can't have a bright vibrant, vital relationship with God if we don't listen to what he is saying to us. Because Scripture is the number one way that God speaks to his people. There are other ways he speaks to us, but the number one way that God speaks is through his written Word. And as Christians, we believe that the sixty-six books which make up the Bible are inspired, or to use the word that Paul makes up in our second Scripture reading for today, God-breathed, breathed-out by God. Notice how the word "inspire" has the same root word as "respiration." Inspiration is literally life breathed out by God into something.

And we believe the Bible is inspired, has life in it, in a way that no other books, no other words, have life. We believe that these books are authoritative in a way that no other books are authoritative. We are people of The Book. And everything we need to know for faith, and really everything we need to know to understand life, to understand who we are, to understand what we are called to be and do, is in this book. And because God is good, because God does not contradict himself, because God does not lie, does not speak out of both sides of his mouth, we know God will never contradict what he has

written in his Word for us and so the best way to get to know God, the best way to get to know the character of God, the best way to get to know who we are in relationship with God, and how we are called to live by God, is to steep ourselves in this book. This book reveals God's will and God's character in a way that nothing else ever will. And since life is all about having this vital relationship with God, worshiping him, enjoying him forever, I think we need to be intentional and disciplined about spending time in God's Word.

In fact, if we listen to our first Scripture reading for today from Psalm 119, we are called to be devoted to God's Word, to delight in God's Word. We've looked at Psalm 119 before. It's a special chapter in Scripture, and is by far the longest chapter in the entire Bible. In fact, this one chapter is longer than some books of the Bible! It is a poem or a song written according to a certain style that celebrates the blessings of the Word of God. Some of you may remember back to your English classes that there are certain types of poems that follow certain rules. Like a sonnet or a haiku, they have to be written in a certain way. This is a poem written according to the acrostic style, and an acrostic poem simply follows a certain set of letters. Some of the old, bad love poetry, "L is for the way you look tonight. O is for...", that's an acrostic. Not a very good one, but it's an acrostic.

This an acrostic poem written to follow the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. So if you were to open up the Bible in Hebrew and find Psalm 119, you would see the first eight lines all begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *aleph*. The next eight lines all begin with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *beth*, and so on and so forth, down through all 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Imagine the level of skill it would take, not only to write a poem that way but that it would still make sense and be worth

reading! But the author went to all that trouble, to all that skill, following that structure, to show us how important the Word of God is, to show us how we should be devoted to delighting in the Scriptures that God has given us. “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word,” and later on, your word is a lamp unto my feet and they light unto my path. How sweet are your words to my taste? Sweeter than honey to my mouth.” (Psalm 119:9, 105).

Now, one thing you may not realize is that the ancient Israelites did not have sugar, at least not the way that we have sugar, because sugar cane and sugar beets did not grow in ancient Israel. It's a relatively late thing in history to have sugar the way that we do so if you had a sweet tooth in ancient Israel, and you can bet that as many people then had sweet tooth as we do today, you really didn't have a lot of options for eating something sweet. You had fruit, like dates and figs and persimmons, which could be very sweet, and basically, you had honey and that was it. So, honey was an absolute treat. Honey was delectable, so much more delectable today than we can imagine and yet the author here is saying that to him, the Word of God, the Scriptures, the law of God, is sweeter even than honey, that he looks forward to reading the Scriptures even more than he looks forward to eating something sweet. Can you imagine putting that in today's language? “I look forward to reading the Word of God more than I look forward to ice cream or cake?” Or for me, chocolate peanut butter pie? Do you have that level of delight and devotion to the Scriptures that you think the Word is more delicious, more delectable, more delightful than dessert? The psalmist did. This is the attitude he is calling us to have, that we should strive to love the Scriptures so much, that we spend time reading it, and pondering it, and meditating upon it, and delighting in it, taking joy from it.

We find Paul telling Timothy the very same thing in our second Scripture reading for today, the final letter that Paul wrote for the New Testament, maybe the final letter he ever wrote, period. Paul is in prison at this point and not just any prison – he’s not just under house arrest like he had been before, he’s in the dungeon. He has been convicted of being a subversive for his religion he has had the sentence of execution pronounced upon him, he is just waiting to become a martyr for this faith. He knows what’s coming, and he writes one last letter to his protégé, Timothy. Getting ready to pass the torch, here’s what he says:

*“Timothy, number one, remember my example. Timothy, number two, keep the faith, and number three, preach the Word of God. I charge you in the presence of God and Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead and by his appearing in his kingdom, preach the word. Be ready in season and out of season. Reprove, rebuke, exhort with complete patience and teaching, for the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching but having itching ears. They will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passion and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.” (2 Timothy 3:10-4:8)*

Sounds a lot like today, doesn’t it? If you knew you were going to die and you had time to write one last letter to the people who came after you, what would you write? Would you include in your letter the call to be devoted to the Word of God, to be devoted to your faith, to be devoted to nurturing this relationship with the Lord? Paul thought that was so important that he included a long section about this in his letter to Timothy and says, “Timothy, be ready in season and out of season, to proclaim this word. Be ready when the people want to hear it and when they don’t want to hear it. Be ready to

proclaim this Word, even if you suffer and die for it, even if it makes you incredibly unpopular because the people don't want to hear it. Nevertheless, be devoted to the sweetness of the Scriptures which have God's breath of life breathed into them, because the Scriptures are powerful and effective and worthwhile. They always accomplish their purpose, they equip us for every good work, and studying this Word is a phenomenal engine for growth in your life with God. In your faith, in your living, as we seek this deeper relationship with the Lord, as we seek to be a church that is full of life and joy and purpose."

And I realize, like last week as we were talking about prayer, I realize you get this. I don't think a lot of people are going to argue with me here about the importance of the Bible, at least I hope not. If you do, that's okay. But I also realize there are some of you out there sitting there saying, "Yeah, I get this but every time I sit down to read the Bible, I don't understand what I read so what can I do about that?"

Well, there are several things I think we can do about that. The first is what we're doing right here right now: come to worship. Because every time we have a worship service, and I mean every single time, we read Scripture. We cannot have a worship service without reading the Scripture and 99 times out of 100, we have what we're doing right now which is somebody interpreting the Scriptures, proclaiming the Scriptures for us. And like with prayer, the Scripture disciplines are very similar: the more you do it the better you become at it. There's no other way to learn. The way to learn prayer and the way to learn reading and understanding and pondering and meditating upon Scripture, is to do it and to keep on doing it. So I think we need to make worship a priority in our

lives, to schedule things around worship rather than shoving worship in wherever it happens to fit. We need to make it a priority that we come to hear the Word proclaimed.

But, just as eating one physical meal a week is not enough to nourish us and keep us going, feeding upon the Word once a week in church is not enough spiritually to keep us going throughout the week. We need to feed every day upon the Word of God. We need to spend time in the Word every day, and just as we talked last week, every day we need to make an appointment with God, to spend time in prayer. We also need to spend time listening to what God has to say to us in reply through his Scriptures, and I think we need to be intentional about this, to put it on the calendar, to make it a part of our routine – that every day, we go someplace where it's quiet, and we turn off the TV, and we turn off the radio, and we turn off the phone, or if you're an old-fashioned kind of person that has a cord still attached to their phone, you take it off the hook. (I remember those, I'm not so old that I don't remember landlines!) But you go to a place that's quiet where you're not going to be interrupted, and you get yourself in the right frame of mind to come into the presence of God. You gather your materials, and you read your Bible, and you spend time in prayer. We need to do that every day to nurture our relationship with God, and there are all kinds of tools to help us become better readers of Scripture.

Seriously, if you are somebody that struggles with understanding the Bible, rejoice, because you are living in a time when there are more resources available to us than at any other time in history. Seriously, it is overwhelming the number of resources that we have at our disposal! We have books, we have magazines, we have radio programs, TV programs, podcasts, internet websites. There are all kinds of resources available if you want to become stronger in your faith, if you want to become a better



student of Scripture. There's an overwhelming number of resources, we just have to be willing to go and find them and use them. The question is how devoted are we to Scripture? Are we willing to go spend time in the Christian bookstore, browsing through the options that are available? To search through the internet to find the sites that are available for us? Are we willing to put the time in? At the very least, I always recommend that every believer get a Study Bible. It's a Bible with notes and articles and charts and graphs and maps, so that as you read, you can look at the bottom of the page and find helps to interpret what it is you are reading. There are all kinds of Study Bibles available. I would be more than happy to help you get one or you can just go to Lifeway Christian Bookstore and browse through their Study Bibles and find one that works for you. We've got some in our church library. I've got some in my library to show you. I'd love to help you with that.

I also always recommend that people get a Bible reading program. There's tons available free on the internet, or I can find options for you. Basically, what it is, if you follow this plan, you will read through the entire Bible in a year or three years or whatever your option, whatever your goal is – it's something that you can be disciplined in following to help you read the Scriptures. Of course, we have opportunities here at church: we have Sunday School classes for young people and adults. There's a brand new Sunday School class starting October 1<sup>st</sup> which will be taught by (teacher's name). There's Monday Evening Bible study, that is the Pastor's Bible Study, my number two favorite thing about my job - getting to teach the Word of God. There's a women's prayer time and Bible study starting on October 5<sup>th</sup> called, "Heart to Heart," on Thursday

mornings taught by (teachers' names). If you are a woman of the church, you are welcome to come and join our women to pray and to learn the Scriptures.

There're all kinds of things that we can do to become better readers of the Bible; the key is to avail ourselves of these resources in an intentional, disciplined way so that we get as much of the Bible in us as possible, so that we can be grown and shaped according to God's Word. We should read expecting to hear from God. We should read, delighting in the fact that we can know what God wants from us. He has revealed that, we can know the mind of God. We can know his will for our lives. We need to read, asking for the Holy Spirit to speak to us, because the more we do this, the more we will have the words stored up in our hearts when we need it.

When I was in college, I was in a Christian group called Gospel Team, and every year, we would go on retreat to one of the cabins owned by one of the campus groups. It was a way to get to know the new members, to make goals for the year, to refocus on what our purpose was. I'll never forget my sophomore year retreat; we were in a time of Bible Study, and one of the new members, a freshman girl named (name) all of the sudden reached into her Bible and pulled out an envelope that was kind of battered. She said, "This is the last letter that my sister, (name), wrote to me before she died. I treasure this; I read it over and over again because I'm never going to get another letter from her. "This letter", she said, "is the tie that I have to my sister (name) until I see her again when I go to be with Jesus. Now, if I feel this strongly about a letter written by my sister, how much more should I feel about this book that God has written for me? Because he also died, only his death and his resurrection have a power that my sister's death did not have, and his words have a power that my sister's words do not have. And that's why I

spend time every day not only reading my sister's letter, but reading the Bible, which God has given because he loves me even more than (name) loved me."

And I have never forgotten that. That was a powerful moment, what I like to call a "Come-to-Jesus moment," where it just feels like you have been smacked upside the head, and God has said, "Pay attention, something important is happening here!" Do we have that level of passion and delight for the Word of God that (name) had? Are we reading the Bible, remembering that it is an incredible gift that God has given us? Are we reading it, therefore, in an intentional, disciplined way, seeking to hear what God has to say to us, and how that applies to our lives? Are we asking God to speak through his Word and then putting that Word into practice, or like the man in the *Babylon Bee* article, are we sitting there saying, "Gee, I really wish God would tell me what he wants," all while our Bibles are closed sitting literally three feet away? This is a true engine for growth for us and for our church if we are intentional about spending time in the Word and drawing close to Jesus. It will give us joy and vitality, both personally and in our congregation. So let us store up the Word in our hearts. Hallelujah! To God alone be the glory.

Let us pray: God, we're so grateful for your Word. We thank you for that gift. We pray that you would give us a delight in your Word and that you would help us understand what you have written for us, that will be able to apply it to our lives. We pray all of this, in Jesus' Name. Amen.

**“Disciplining Our Appetites” (Esther 4:1-17; Matthew 4:1-11) – September 24, 2017.**

We are continuing our sermon series on the spiritual disciplines, on the tools that we have at our disposal to help us train ourselves for godliness – the tools that we have to seek a deeper fellowship with the Lord, both in our personal lives and as congregation. And today we’ve come to what I like to call “the ugly stepchild” of the spiritual disciplines – and that’s the discipline of fasting.

This is the one we don’t want to talk about. When I taught an eight-week class on the spiritual disciplines back in 2015, in the summer, this is the one I got the most pushback about. This is the one people said, “I don’t want to do that, I don’t want to fast. That sounds awful. Why would anybody do that?” And yet there was a time, a long time in church history, when every believer practiced fasting, when it was accepted as a matter of course that fasting was a part of our faith as much as prayer, as much as studying scripture. And so we’re going to take a look at fasting again today because again, our goal, our desire, is that we have greater vitality in our spiritual lives. Our goal, our desire is that we have greater vitality in our church, as well. So we’re going to look at everything at our disposal to help us achieve that.

So, if you’re not familiar, if you’ve never practiced fasting, fasting is abstaining from something – traditionally that something has been food – for a spiritual purpose. Abstaining from *something* for a spiritual purpose – and there all kinds of fasts that can be practiced. Again, traditionally, it’s abstaining from all food, but not necessarily from water, or sometimes not from fruit juices or something like that. But sometimes people do a partial fast, they only abstain from certain kinds of foods. One that has become very

popular in the past ten years because of a book that was published is what's called "The Daniel Fast", based on Daniel Chapter 1, when Daniel and his three friends refused to eat the unclean food from the king's table, and instead only ate fruits and vegetables. So, a Daniel fast is only eating fruits and vegetables - no meat, no breads, no processed foods - nothing like that.

There's also what has recently become more popular, what's called an "electronic fast." Abstaining maybe from social media, for a period of time – no Facebook, no Twitter, no Instagram. It's harder for some of us folks, don't laugh! Or, unplugging all together, abstaining from all screen time, not watching TV, not getting on the computer except for work, not using our little electronic screens – cutting that "digital umbilical cord", as they call it, for a period of time, for a spiritual purpose.

But I've also heard of people abstaining from sleep for a time, abstaining from sex for a time, abstaining from things like criticalness. Wouldn't that be a novel experience, to abstain from that? And this can be an individual choice. You see that most often, say, during the season of Lent – those who still practice a type of fasting giving up certain foods for a spiritual purpose, for a discipline purpose, for Lent. But there are also corporate fasts. You might be surprised to know that several times in the history of the United States, the president has proclaimed a day of prayer and fasting for the whole nation because of a crisis, or whole congregations have chosen to spend a week, say, fasting, or certain days fasting and going before the Lord.

Interestingly, when we look at what Scripture has to say about fasting, God only ever commanded it once, and for one day out of the year. Israel was to fast on the Day of Atonement, on Yom Kippur, which is coming up next week, I believe. But we find all

kinds of people practicing this discipline of fasting: Moses did. David did. Elijah. As (liturgist's name) read for us, we heard Esther practicing fasting. In the New Testament, Anna, who lived in the temple, fasted throughout her days. Paul and Barnabas fasted as they were getting ready for a missionary journey. Jesus, as we heard in our second reading, Jesus himself practiced this discipline of fasting. And there was a time in the early Church, in New Testament times and in the first century, when Christians fasted two days a week, and that was considered normal. That eventually went away, but Martin Luther fasted, John Calvin fasted, John Knox, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley... In fact, John Wesley, who is the founder of the Methodist tradition – he refused in his day to ordain any young man to ministry who did not fast two days a week. So there's a long history in the Christian Church of practicing this discipline of fasting. It's only recently that we have gotten rid of it. It's only recently that we have lost the idea that discipline is actually a good thing, that we need to gain control of our appetites as (children's sermon volunteer) was talking about, gain control of our urges and our desires so that they don't gain control of us. And that's what we're talking about here.

I think it says something about us as a people, as a society, that in this day and age when we have more of everything than anyone has ever had – we have more food, more choices, more things, more stuff, more conveniences than anyone at any time in history – we are less willing to give them up, even temporarily, than those who went before us, who comparatively speaking, had so little. People who had less than us were more willing to give it up for a time than we are today.

So, let's talk about what fasting is not. First of all, fasting is not a diet program. It's not a way to lose a couple pounds. I know that's what we all thought. When you hear

fasting, you think, “Oh, well, I could stand to lose a pound or two, that wouldn’t be a bad thing necessarily.” Let me tell you, if you’re going to fast as a way to lose weight, you are going to have a miserable, self-centered experience. Fasting is a terrible way to diet and if you try that, everyone around you is going to have a terrible time as well!

Number two, fasting is not a way to get on God’s good side. Fasting is not a way to try to get God to do something for you that you want him to do. We are not going on a hunger strike against God! We are not trying to please him or impress him. On the one hand, God cannot be manipulated like that, and on the other hand, as I try and assure you in every worship service, we don’t need to try and get on God’s good side. We’re already on God’s good side! He has proven to us beyond a shadow of a doubt that He loves us, that He cares for us, that He cherishes us. He loves us so much, he sent us his son to live and die for us, so we don’t need to worry about whether or not God cares for us. He’s proven that.

So, what is fasting for then? Why would we do this? Because again, as we’re talking about all these disciplines, it’s the *why* that really matters. It’s the *why* that is more important than the *how*.

So, number one, fasting is a way to enhance your prayers. Fasting and prayer always go hand-in-hand. Fasting is way to intensify your going before the Lord in prayer. We see this in our first reading for today, from the book of Esther. And we’ve looked at Esther here before, we’ve looked at Esther in Bible Study, but if you have forgotten the story or if you’re not familiar with the story, the story of Esther happens several hundred years before Jesus. God’s people are living away from the promised land, from the land of Israel. They’re living in the land controlled by the King of Persia. (Persia is modern-

day Iran, up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.) And through a series of unfortunate events, an evil counselor to the king, an evil man named Haman, has tricked the king into signing into law an edict that would destroy all of the Jewish people throughout the entire Persian Empire. Haman has tricked the king into assigning a law for genocide.

But at the same time that that's going on, through another series of events, there's a new queen in the Persian Empire and she just happens to be a young Jewish girl named Esther. And in our chapter for today, Esther's relative, Mordecai, the man who raised her (she was an orphan), comes to just outside the palace and advocates for Esther to use her position as queen, to use the power and authority that God has given to her, to speak out on behalf of their people, to try and save their people somehow from this evil law that has been passed. But there's a problem: Esther has not even seen the king in 30 days. For over a month, her husband has not sent for her. And the law in Persia was: you did not just barge into the room to see the king. The only way you got to see the king was if the king sent for you. And if you were impudent enough to barge into the king's presence, you could very well die for that. That was the law.

So, Esther was caught on the horns of a dilemma here. On the one hand, if she did nothing, to save her own life, all of her people could be executed simply for being Jewish. But on the other hand, if she tried to advocate for her people, she could lose her own head; she could die for it. So, Esther does something very interesting. She sends a message to Mordecai saying, "Call upon all the Jewish people in the city to pray and fast on my behalf for three days. I and my ladies in waiting will do the very same thing and after this time of imploring the Lord for strength and wisdom and guidance, after this time of intensely coming in the presence of the Lord through prayer and fasting, then



after I have been strengthened, I will go to the king and If I die I die.” And of course, as we know, Esther succeeded in saving her people.

The same thing is going on in our second reading for today. Jesus, after he has been baptized, is getting ready to embark on his public ministry for the first time. For the first time, he’s going to publicly travel around and teach and heal, and be our Savior. But before that, he retreats into the desert for forty days, where he fasts and prays. Now if you are not familiar with fasting, if you’ve never practiced it, you may say to yourself, “Wow, that would really make somebody weak, forty days of fasting,” and to some extent, yes. Physically, of course, you don’t eat for forty days, yeah you’re going to be weak, you’re going to be hungry. But spiritually, forty days spent in intense prayer and fasting, going to the Lord over and over again – that strengthens you spiritually. Jesus needed those forty days of prayer and fasting to have the strength necessary to meet the three temptations that the Evil One throws in his face – and he succeeds in resisting all the temptations of the devil. So, we fast and pray as a way to strengthen ourselves before the Lord. We fast and we pray to strengthen ourselves spiritually, to seek the Lord. That time we would have spent eating, that time we would have spent preparing food, we instead use to pray, and to go before the Lord. And that hunger that we feel physically reminds us of the hunger we have spiritually, the deeper, ultimate hunger we have for fellowship with the Lord.

So, you’ll find especially God’s people throughout history, fasting during a time of crisis, fasting when they are in distress. Going with this, often you’ll also find Christians fasting when they are facing a major decision, when they are seeking to really hear what God wants me to do. Should I do X or should I do Y? Should I move? Should I

take the new job? Should I marry the guy? Should I do this or that? Should I become an elder or a deacon? Lord, what is your will for me?

This past week, I was talking with my mom about this sermon, and she told me that as she and my dad were trying to decide whether or not they should move from southeast Ohio where I was born up to Ashtabula where they ultimately lived for thirty years, they fasted for a week, seeking the Lord's will. And my mom said it was the easiest fasting she'd ever done. She said it wasn't difficult at all, and ultimately, they heard the Lord saying that he wanted them to move, and to take the new call. We fast as we seek the Lord in our lives. We fast when we are repenting, when we are humbling ourselves, when you are trying to overcome temptation. There's all kinds of reasons that we can fast but as we do, what we will find is that fasting is a way to combat the things that normally control us.

So much of our lives today is about food. So much of our lives revolves around when and what we eat. We don't eat to live anymore; so many of us live to eat. And so much of our lives today is about this (*holds up smart phone*), about our phones. Ever notice how much people are on their phones these days? Let me tell you, whenever I do practice an electronic fast – and I try to do it every so often – it amazes me how hard it is! And it amazes me when I say, “I'm not going to be on my phone today, unless I absolutely need to, if somebody calls or texts me,” when I say I'm going to take the day off from that, it amazes me how productive I am when I'm not being interrupted every 20 minutes to look at my phone! I'm amazed at how much more I hear the voice of the Lord when there aren't all these other competing voices, clamoring for my attention. I'm amazed at how much more time I have to pray.

It really is amazing when you discipline your appetites, the things you learn. And I'm willing to bet, when you practice fasting of any kind, there are going to be emotions that are going to start welling up – and those are going to be the very emotions, the very feelings, that God's going to want to deal with in you. And as you get hungry, you might find that you are angry about being hungry, “hangry” we call it sometimes. And it may be because you are a much angrier person than you realize. You may have more anger in your life than you have ever noticed, and God may be wanting to deal with that. Or you may be anxious or fearful – “Gee, I don't know if I can do this, I don't know if I'm doing it right, I don't know what that says about me that I can't do this, oh my goodness, I'm so worried and fearful and fretful.” God may want to deal with that anxiety that is controlling your life more than you realize. And as we combat these things by purposefully, intentionally disciplining ourselves, what we're doing is choosing freedom – denying ourselves taking up our cross and following Jesus, and choosing the freedom that he wants to give us from the things that are controlling our lives so that he can be the one who is in control. Because most of us, and I'm putting myself in this group as well, most of us, our default setting is, “Sure, I would love to follow Jesus so long as it doesn't get too hard. Of course, I will follow Jesus, as long as I can be comfortable and safe while I do it.” Let me tell you, that's not real life. We will not always be comfortable and safe as we follow Jesus. In fact, I guarantee there are going to be times when all you have left in your life is Jesus and when all of you have left is Jesus, you'll find that Jesus is enough.

But by practicing these disciplines of abstinence, abstaining from certain things, disciplining our appetites, what we're doing is training ourselves for these tough times,

training ourselves to know a little bit of deprivation, a little bit of loss and to learn to go to the Lord in that time, to rely on the strength of the Lord in that time, so that when the bottom falls out from under us, we know what to do, so that we have the coping skills and the strength, and the strength of character necessary that our faith will weather those times of crisis and trial. We are training ourselves to endure the tough times by strengthening our faith and our fellowship with Jesus Christ. By fasting we learn we truly do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

So, again, I realize a lot of you, you recognize fasting is Biblical, fasting is a good thing, fasting is something that Christians should do or try. But I also realize some of you are sitting there and saying, “Yeah, Joshua, I get it, that sounds great. Fasting sounds like a great idea for *them*, not for *me*.” And that’s okay. Fasting is not a requirement for Christians. You can be a Christian and not fast. It’s not like prayer, it’s not like reading and studying the Bible. Those things are necessary to be a Christian. But I also want to urge you to truly think and pray about trying the discipline of fasting, because we all can do this to some extent. Obviously, if you are sitting there and you have a medical condition, you have diabetes, be careful. Go and talk to your doctor before you practice the discipline of fasting. But I know we can all at least miss one meal. We can all fast for 12-14 hours. You know how I know that? Because that’s how long you have to fast to do bloodwork, folks, and we all have done that. We can miss a meal and we’re not going to die. How about trying that as a spiritual exercise? How about missing one meal and spending that time in prayer going before the Lord and seeing what issues well up that he wants to deal with. Or we can try a Daniel fast, a partial fast, or an electronic fast. There are all different ways we can try this discipline, and then if you want to do more, if you

find this is something that really blesses you, come and see me. I can give you more guidelines for bigger, stricter kinds of fasts, things that I've gathered through my reading in my studying. I can give you all kinds of resources for this. But I hope we'll all think and pray about trying this somehow.

And I hope we'll remember the key to this is the *why* we do it. Don't do it to please me. Don't do it to show off in front of everybody else. Remember when Jesus says when you fast, keep it a secret, don't wear a little button that says, "I'm fasting today. Ask me about it." Don't post it on your Facebook page, "John Smith is fasting today. Aren't I holy and wonderful?" That's not what it's about. This is about training ourselves, disciplining our appetites. It's a means toward strengthening our prayer, combating those things that control us, submitting ourselves to Jesus Christ, and you may be surprised what you will learn and what blessings he will give you through this discipline. For we fast as a means to obey the Lord, and to train ourselves to be his faithful, godly people. So let us discipline our appetites! And to him alone be the glory!

Let us pray: God, we thank you for this gift that you have given to us, and we ask, Lord, that those of us that you are nudging here to try this discipline – give us courage, give us strength, help us to be faithful, and help us all to grow in faith, in Jesus' name. Amen.

**“Be Still, My Soul” (Psalm 62:1-12; Mark 1:35-39) – October 1, 2017.**

We are continuing our sermon series on spiritual disciplines, these tools that we have to help us train in godliness, these tools that we have which can help us to become more like Jesus Christ, our master. We’re nearing the end of this series; there’s only one more week left. I hope you’ve been keeping up with your Reflection Journals that I passed out at the beginning of the series! Not only will they help me with my degree project, but I hope they will help you as well, as you think through these issues that we’re talking about.

This week, we are looking at the twin disciplines of solitude and silence – purposefully, intentionally getting away to a place where you can be alone, getting away from all the noise and hurry and hustle and bustle of life so that you can spend more quality time with the Lord, and hear what he has to say, so you can spend time in his word, and spend time in prayer. You’ll notice again like last week when we were looking at fasting, as we talk about these disciplines, we also are talking about the disciplines of prayer and reading Scripture. Most of the spiritual disciplines we’re talking about are actually ways to help us practice those disciplines of prayer and reading and studying Scripture. If you take nothing else away from this series, I want you to take this away: I want you to spend more quality time in prayer, and in the reading the studying of Scripture! Because the only way to greater vitality in your spiritual life, in your walk with Jesus Christ, the only way to greater vitality in our congregation is if we take seriously prayer and the reading and the studying of Scripture! And sometimes, the best way to do that is to be intentional, to be disciplined, about getting away from it all, retreating for a

time from the hurry and busyness and the noise of life, and to spend time in solitude and in silence with God.

And yet again, this is something that we find Jesus himself doing in our second Scripture reading for today. As I told you at the beginning of this series, all of these disciplines we're looking at are things Jesus himself did or taught about. So, in our desire to be more Christ-like, we are looking at these habits that Jesus himself formed. Now this is still very early in Jesus' ministry; we're still in Mark Chapter One at this point. So, he has just called the first few disciples, and while spending time in the town of Capernaum, he has delivered a man from demon possession, and he has healed Simon Peter's mother-in-law, who had a dangerous high fever. Naturally that's not stuff you can really keep quiet. When somebody performs miraculous healings, that's news that spreads very quickly, and so Jesus all of the sudden finds himself to be a very, very popular guy. Everybody wants a piece of him at this point. Everybody wants to talk to him, everybody wants to be healed by him or to have him come and heal a friend, a neighbor, a family member, etc, etc. If this were today, we can imagine the camera crews would be outside his house, you know, the klieg lights would be on, the people would be shoving a microphone in his face, people would be saying, "I have a contract here that I can manage your branding, and be in charge of your online social media presence so you can really take this healing thing to the next level, Jesus!" And the disciples, of course, are thrilled by this. Their master is all of the sudden very popular! Everybody wants to come and hear him. We have growth, we have success, the pews are full finally, and what does Jesus do? Rising very early in the morning while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place and there he prayed. That's not what we were expecting.

That's not what the disciples were expecting. And this is by no means the only time that we see this pattern of when things all of a sudden get very, very busy and very, very intense, of Jesus withdrawing and spending time in prayer.

In the Gospel of Luke, we're told a story of Jesus healing a leper and again all the crowds coming and wanting him to heal them as well – but he would withdraw, Luke tells us, to desolate places and pray. And that the verb tense that Luke chooses there is he *withdrew and continued to withdraw*. This was a habit he had, of getting away every so often to a quiet, lonely place where he could spend time with his father. We saw this last week as well. Jesus is baptized and what does he do? He withdraws into the desert to pray and fast for 40 days in solitude and silence so that he could be strengthened to meet those temptations that the devil threw at him, so that he could be strengthened for the beginning of his public ministry.

And so we are looking at that same pattern, those same disciplines, here today – of us finding a way to withdraw to a quiet place where we are alone so we can be with the same father who gives us strength for our trials and our temptations. And we see in our first reading which (liturgist's name) read so beautifully for us, King David doing this very same thing. King David had learned this very same lesson: "For God alone my soul waits in silence. From him comes my salvation." (Psalm 62:1) Now, it's clear from the psalm that David has written here that he is under a great deal of stress. He has enemies who are attacking him, who are trying to get rid of him. We don't know exactly the details because that hasn't been recorded along with this psalm, but we know from reading First and Second Samuel, from reading the history of David, there were many times throughout his life when he had enemies who were trying to get rid of him, not the



least of which the time when his own son, Absalom, tries to foster a coup against him to get dad off the throne and put Absalom on the throne instead. So David understood stress, okay. David understood pain. David understood personal attacks, much greater than the kind of stress and pain and personal attacks most of us deal with today. When somebody is against us or says something that hurts our feelings, that's bad enough but people were trying to hurt more than David's feelings here! He was in a bad way. But what does he do? "For God alone, oh my soul" he says, "wait in silence, for my hope is from him, he only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress. I shall not be shaken, for on my God rests my salvation and my glory, my mighty rock, my refuge is God." (Psalm 62:5-7)

David's doing what I like to call "self-talk" here, or preaching the gospel to yourself. It's a skill we all need to develop. Whenever you see in the Psalms the psalmist writing, "oh my soul," that's the psalmist talking to himself, to his own soul. And this is what David is doing here. When these tough times have come, when he's feeling exhausted and overwhelmed, when we feel exhausted and overwhelmed, when our enemies number greater than our friends, and we're not too sure about our friends either, here is what Scripture is telling us to do: withdraw to a quiet place, get to a place where you can be alone, and remind yourself of the truth of the situation, remind yourself of who God is. God is our rock, God is our refuge, God is our fortress. If you are anchored on him, if you have built your life on the solid rock that is Jesus Christ, then even if disaster comes, even if everything looks like it is falling apart, even if there are all kinds of people saying all kinds of nasty things about you, nevertheless, you will not be shaken because God will not be shaken. God will not be shaken! God is our salvation, God is our

refuge! Whatever happens to us – and it may be bad – all we need to do is to wait for him.

As we said together in our call to worship, Psalm 46, “Be still and know that He is God.” But folks, sometimes we can’t know that; sometimes, we can’t know that down deep into the depths of our souls, we can’t know that he is God *unless we be still*. We can’t know that and really believe that if we are running around, freaking out, wringing our hands like chickens with their heads cut off. We can’t know this truth about God – that he is all-powerful, that he is all-wise and all-knowing, that his is omnipresent, everywhere, that he is sovereign, that history is being held in in his hands, that we are being held in his hands, that there is nothing too big, too great, or too overwhelming for God – we can’t know that truth down into our depths when all we are doing is focusing on the problem, on the things that are wrong, on all the things that we are worried about and anxious about, on the things that might happen – what if, what if, what if, what if, you know that line of thought. We can’t know this truth about God until we sometimes withdraw, get away, get quiet, and focus on the truth of the gospel. And we need to tell that truth to ourselves over and over again until we believe it again.

Sometimes we have to withdraw as Jesus did, as David did, discipline ourselves, train ourselves, and tell ourselves what God has told us many, many times. Once God has spoken twice, I have heard this meaning – God has told this to me repeatedly and maybe one of these days, I’ll get it – that power belongs to him, and that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love. God is powerful enough. God is loving enough to help me through this. We need to make that a discipline in our lives. And we need to do that spontaneously, and we need to do that in a planned way - both are important.

By spontaneous, I mean sometimes as we're going about our day like (children's sermon volunteer) was talking about with the kids, sometimes we need to stop in the middle of our day, in the middle of our to-do list, when we find ourselves getting overwhelmed and anxious and angry and depressed and all of those other feelings, we need to take five minutes, fifteen minutes, half an hour, an hour, I don't care how long it is, and retreat to that quiet place and focus again on who God is and that God is with me. Focus on his Word, spend time in prayer. If you are driving along in the car and you feeling yourself getting anxious, turn off the radio and get quiet and pray and seek the Lord as you drive along. If you are at work and something terrible happens – that co-worker that just knows how to push every one of your buttons, pushes every one of them again, just for fun – close the office door, go to a quiet corner and take those few minutes in silence and solitude to get right with God again. You're freaking out at home, go into your prayer closet, pull your bedroom door closed, I don't care, go into the bathroom and close the door. God doesn't care where you pray! And spend that quiet, alone time with him, getting your eyes fixed back on what is right and true.

I love the story from church history of Susanna Wesley. Susanna Wesley was the mother of John Wesley and Charles Wesley who started the Wesleyan Methodist tradition. Susanna Wesley had nineteen children; not all of them survived infancy, but still, nineteen children! The next time you get overwhelmed by your kids or grandkids, it could be nineteen of them! So naturally, Susanna Wesley understood chaos, stress, noise, and when she started to get overwhelmed, she would take her long apron and throw it up over her head, and her kids knew that was the sign mom needs some quiet time with

Jesus. And they would leave her alone, and she would spend that time in prayer. That was a very creative way to practice this. It worked for her.

Sometimes we need to be creative in finding ways to do this on a spontaneous level, but we also need to plan this into our schedule, plan time away from the stress and the noise of life where we can be alone with the Lord. I have a pastor friend who, on occasion, goes on a monastic retreat. There's an Episcopal convent (*Editor's Note: It's actually Catholic*) here in the Cincinnati area – I think it's in Milford – that allows you for a few days or a week to retreat and to become part of that planned quiet life of the monastery. And I reached out to her this past weekend. I said, "Tell me about this. Tell me whether this was a good thing for you. Was this helpful? And here's what she said,

*"When we quiet our mouths and our computer and our phones, we can hear the voice of God so much more clearly."*

And that reminded me of the cartoon I made sure (administrative assistant) put in the bulletin this week. The guy with the earphones on, the telephone on, the radio on, and all of this laying there saying, "Gee, I wonder why I don't hear from God anymore?" and in the distance, the Shepherd is calling out. We can't hear.

Now maybe going on a monastic retreat isn't practical for you. Maybe your spouse wouldn't care for that, if you want to live as a monk or a nun for a couple of days. Maybe it doesn't fit into your work schedule. But maybe instead you could write on your calendar some hour during the morning or during the afternoon, to come down here and to sit in the sanctuary in quiet, or downstairs in the chapel in quiet. Make sure somebody can let you in so that you can be here away from all the stress and noise of your life. To spend time, with the Lord or maybe, you can go for a hike in the woods or go for a drive

in your car just for a half an hour or an hour and hear what God has to say. We need the time to still and quiet our souls, to know again that he is God, and we are his.

I can hear your objections right now. Okay, I know some of you are with me, but I know some of you are still really skeptical about this. I know we have some extroverts here in the room who are on the state of emotional collapse at the very thought of being quiet and alone for a whole hour. That just sent a shiver down your spine. You're freaking out a little bit at the thought of silence for a whole hour. And some of you, you're waiting, you're just sitting on your hands so you can't pull your calendar and wave it in my face and say, "And when exactly am I supposed to do this? When exactly am I supposed to get away from it all and be quiet? Really?"

So just a couple of thoughts for you who have these objections. Number one: Jesus was the most important person who ever lived. Ever! As important as we are – and I believe every one of us is incredibly important – he was the most important person who ever lived. Our work pales in comparison to the work that he did. And if he needed to do this, if he could find time to do this, then what's our excuse? If Jesus needed to withdraw to quiet, lonely places to spend time with God, how much more do we need to do this? It's a matter of priorities, and if we're too busy to spend time alone with God in prayer, then we're *too busy*, period. And we need to find a way to unclutter our schedules so that we can spend the time with God that we are designed to have. I will say this over and over again: busyness and hurry and noise, are the enemies of our souls! Busyness and hurry and noise are the enemies of a mature Christian life. We need time to slow down and be quiet with God, and if that still intimidates you, if you still feel a little bit of fear around this, then let me encourage you to push through that fear, because clearly this

something that you need to discipline yourself to try. Clearly, God is trying to say something to you.

I know it's hard, I know we are trained to have constant noise around us. I read an article about the difference between how quiet life was a hundred years ago compared to now. I mean honestly, they're playing advertisements now at the gas pumps. You can't even pump gas in peace anymore! There's noise all the time, and some of us have trained ourselves to always have the TV on in the background, or the radio, or you know. I'm guilty of this too. I'm preaching to myself as much as to anybody! But if it intimidates you to be quiet, then maybe you're using that noise to cover up something that God wants to deal with in your life. And maybe he's trying to say something to you and you need to quiet down enough to hear what he has to say. You may be surprised, if you quiet yourself long enough, what God has to say to you!

Don't get caught up on how well you do this, the first time or second time or third time, don't give up because "I tried and five minutes into, I heard bird chirping out the window and my mind started to wander here, there, anywhere, and clearly I'm a horrible a failure because I couldn't do this!" We're training ourselves, and when you train yourself for a marathon, when you train to play a musical instrument, guess what? It's going to be awful the first few times. It just is. The key is to push through that, and to keep training yourself until you are a master of that particular discipline. And with God's help, we can be masters of these disciplines.

Author Donald Whitney writes, "Without exception, the men and women I have known who make the most rapid, consistent and evident growth in Christlikeness have been those who develop a daily time of being alone with God. This time of outward

silence is a time of daily Bible intake and prayer in this solitude is the occasion for private worship.” There’s the key - do we want to be like Christ, do we want to experience that grace, that peace, that power, that joy, that comes from being with him? Then sometimes we need to be still, and to know that he is God, to tell our souls to wait for him in silence. There’s no substitute for it. There’s no quick gimmick that’ll do the same thing. This takes energy and effort and time – but oh my, friends, oh how it is worth it! So let’s find time to withdraw and to be alone and to be quiet with Jesus Christ, for only then can we really hear and take in this good news that God is with us. Hallelujah! To him alone with the glory!

Let us pray: God, we thank you for the gift of prayer, for the gift of your word. We pray that in our noisy and busy lives, that you would teach us how to be still and to know that you are God. But give us the strength, give us the courage, and Lord, as we come to your table, strengthen and nourish us to live for you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

**“Praise God, From Whom All Blessings Flow!” (Numbers 14:1-35; Romans 8:18-30) – October 8, 2017.**

We are finishing up our sermon series on the Spiritual Disciplines, these tools that we have been looking at which help us to train ourselves for godliness, these tools we have been studying as we seek greater vitality, both in our personal lives and in the life of our congregation. Today, we are ending this series by talking about the disciplines of worship and thanksgiving – two very related disciplines, because of course, Thanksgiving is one of the several components of worship. We were made for worship; we were created for the purpose of worshiping God and enjoying him. Our chief end, our chief purpose is to give glory to God and to enjoy him forever. But of course, we don't, do we? At least not as we should. Sin has come into the world, sin has come into our lives, and now we are broken and we do not worship God as we should. Our default setting is no longer to worship the Lord; our default setting, is instead, to grumble against God, to complain against the Lord.

Unfortunately, this is what comes all too naturally for us, and we see that in our first Scripture reading for today which (liturgist) read for us, that long story from the Book of Numbers, one of the most tragic stories in all of Scripture. At this point in the history of God's people, God has brought his people Israel up out of Egypt. They've been out of Egypt for about a year and a half. They've gone to Mount Sinai and have received the Ten Commandments, and they have slowly made their way up to the border of the Promised Land. They're just about to cross over and to take the inheritance that God has promised them, but first, they decide to send our spies to get some information about the land, to get the lay of the land. Those spies went around and gathered that info for forty



days, and then returned then and made their report. Now, the minority report from the spies, given by a man named Caleb and a man named Joshua, was, “Folks, we can do this. Folks, we can conquer this land. God is with us. Come on, let’s go!”

But the other ten spies, they said, “Well, the land is a good land, the land is a fruitful land, like God said. It is a land flowing with milk and honey, but there are big, scary people living in this land. There are Amalekites, and Canaanites, and a whole race of giants next to whom we just look like little tiny grasshoppers. Oh, no! What are we going to do?” And the people hearing this freaked out. They absolutely lost it. The congregation, Moses tells us, raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night and all of the people of Israel grumbled. There’s the keyword: “grumbled” against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Oh, if only we had died in the land of Egypt. If only we would have died in the wilderness. Why is God bringing us up to this land, just to kill us by the sword? Why is God doing this to us? Our wives, our children are going to die, wouldn’t it be better if we just went back to Egypt?” And they looked at one another and they said, “Yes, that’s what we should do. We should choose another leader and go back to Egypt.” And when Joshua and Moses tried to persuade them, tried to change their minds, they actually picked up stones and threatened to kill them for even suggesting that they enter into the Promised Land.

It’s hard to really emphasize how shocking it is that God’s people reacted in this way, because of all the people who have ever lived, these are the very last people who should have reacted in this way when you consider what the Children of Israel have seen in this year and a half that God has been with them. They had seen the ten plagues against the Egyptians, including the Passover plague. They have seen God part the Red Sea, and

they have walked through, between the waters, and didn't even get their feet wet. They have been to Mount Sinai, and have felt God's earthquake as he descended. They have been led by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They have literally eaten miracle bread, which had fallen from the sky each day – the manna. They have drunk water that has sprung forth from a rock in the middle of a desert. They have built God's movable temple, a tent called the tabernacle, and have seen the glory of God come and take up residence. And yet, while God has brought his people up out of Egypt, the people still have Egypt in their hearts. They say they would rather go back to Egypt and be slaves than to trust God and go forward and do something that scares them. They would rather go back to the hell that they know than to maybe trust God and try something outside their comfort zones. They had seen all those miracles from God, but they still did not trust him, and even more importantly, they did not delight in him. They took no joy in the presence of God.

And oh, isn't that our problem still today? I'm not just talking about us here personally in this room, I'm talking about the whole "capital C" Church. This is one of the biggest problems that we in the Church of Jesus Christ face. I don't care where you go, I don't care what congregation you worship with - every single congregation has what I like to call "The Back to Egypt Committee". I've used this term before, but I think it bears repeating. And no, I'm not talking about one particular committee; I'm not talking about a group that gets together and takes minutes. I'm talking about a group of people, and every congregation has them, who would rather sit on the sidelines and grumble and complain and critique and talk about how much better it was way back when, than to go

forward and get involved in what God is doing today in our midst. Every single congregation has this group.

I've talked to many of my pastor friends and they say this is one of their biggest challenges, one of their biggest discouragements as a pastor, and one of the biggest things that is holding their congregation back from going forward and flourishing in the power of God. We see here, in the story that God has given us, that complaining leads to death - if not physical death, then spiritual death. Because complaining and griping and backbiting and this critical spirit is the opposite of thanksgiving. Let me say that again: complaining and griping and backbiting and this spirit of criticism and criticalness is the opposite of Thanksgiving. When we complain the way Israel did here, we are literally looking God in the eye, refusing to submit to him and saying, "God, you have done a lousy job with my life." We are saying, "God, you should do it this way instead." We are actually saying, "God, I can do your job better than you can." That's what we're saying to God when we complain and grumble in this way.

Of course, God is the source of all life, the Scriptures tell us. God is the source of all hope, the source of all joy, the source of all love and peace and blessing. So when we refuse to bow before God, when we refuse to accept his will for us, when we refuse to acknowledge how much we need him, how much he has given to us, when we refuse to submit and worship and give thanks to God, that leads to bitterness and worthlessness and death. That's exactly what happens here. God's people refused to go forward, they refused to enter into the Promised Land which was God's will for them, and God refused to let them go back. He loved them too much to let them go back to Egypt where they would be slaves. They refused to go forward; God refused to let them go back. And that

meant they had nowhere to go. And for the next thirty-eight and a half years, they wandered. They went literally nowhere, wandering around in the desert until that whole generation had laid down and died, all except Caleb and Joshua. And then, because God's will for us is always done, *then* the next generation entered into the Promised Land and took the inheritance that God desired for them. God forgave his people's sins, but they missed out on the joy and blessing.

Folks, how much do we miss out on from God because we refuse to worship and give thanks, and because we are too busy complaining and grumbling and griping? The key here, the key is to make worship and thanksgiving a discipline in our lives. The key is to be intentional in making worship and thanksgiving a part of who we are so that we practice these disciplines every day. Now that doesn't mean that we sit there and pretend that everything is good, because guess what? Everything is not good. There are things that are wrong in our world, and that doesn't mean we can't take our needs and our frustrations and our hurts and our pains and our griefs to the Lord, because, of course, we can take these things to the Lord. God invites us to take these things before him. But there's a difference between taking our hurts and our need and our frustrations before the Lord in prayer, and grumbling and complaining and griping to God about these things. That makes all the difference in the world, folks – the attitude with which we take these things to God. God never tells us to lie. God never tells us to pretend, but he does say in the midst of our pain, in the midst of our frustration, in the midst of our groaning, to still acknowledge and remember what is right and good and true, which is, "I consider," Paul writes, "that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" and later in the passage, "for we know that for all who love

God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:18, 28) These are two incredible truths that we need to master and remember and make a part of our thought-life if we are going to make worship and thanksgiving a part of who we are.

The first is this: as bad as things may be here – and they’re pretty bad sometimes – as much as we may hurt, as much as we may grieve, as much as we may be in pain, as much as we may scratch our heads and wonder how we’re going to make it through, Paul is telling us here in the future, what we are waiting for, what we are looking forward to is going to be good and so wonderful and so amazing, when Christ comes and ushers in the new heavens and new earth, it’s going to be so fantastic that our present sufferings aren’t even going to show up on the scale. The good that is to come is so good, it’s going to make the bad stuff here look like nothing. That’s the truth, that’s a promise from God.

The second thing he’s saying is as bad as things may be here, our God is so powerful and our God is so good, he’s promised to take the evil circumstances of our lives, the terrible things that we’re going through, and to turn them upside down and actually bring good out of those things. For all those who love God, for all those who belong to him, he has promised he’s going to bring good even out of our suffering and pain and trials and hurts. And that also is a promise. I mean that we, like Paul and Silas in the Book of Acts, even if we are thrown in prison in the middle of the night, we can still praise God and sing hymns to him in the darkness. That means that even in the face of terrible hurricanes, even in the face of one of the worst mass shootings in the history of the United States, we can still come here and gather as we have, and give praise to God in the midst of that and give thanks to God in the midst of that, that even in our midst of our

hurts and troubles, our aches and pains, our griefs and the burdens that we're carrying, we can still, in the midst of that, praise God and worship Him.

It's not because we're naïve; it's because we see the deeper and more profound truth, which is that the evil that is going on around us in our world will not triumph. The evil that is going on around us will not have the last word, that in the midst of that evil, we recognize God is still good, God is still powerful, God is still at work. God has promised to transform these terrible circumstances in our lives. God is still worthy of our worship and our thanksgiving in our praise. God has given us ten thousand reasons to rejoice, and we every day, need to go before him and thank him for who he is and what he has done among us.

My point here is this kind of worship, this kind of thanksgiving, needs to be a discipline, a part of our everyday lives. That includes Sunday morning worship. I know, I say it here a lot, but that's because I mean it a lot. We need to be here every Sunday. Just showing up for church every once in a while – that's not enough. When I was a teenager, I tried once – and only once – to get out of going to church. (You know, when you're the pastor's kid, you've got to be there.) Once, I tried to get out of it and my mom looked me in the face and said, "What, God has not blessed you this past week? You don't need to go and give thanks to him for that?" Like I said, I only tried once, because she was right. Every week, God blesses us, and every week, we need to come and give thanks to him and praise him. But even once a week is not enough. It's got to be every day. Folks, as we spend time every day in prayer, as we spend time in the scriptures, we also need to spend time worshiping the Lord, affirming how good his is, how faithful he is, how compassionate he is, how merciful he is. We need to reflect that joy back to him. And

folks, the more we affirm it, the more we say it, the more we believe it. And it changes who we are. And it changes the way we live our days. We need to give thanks – literally to count our blessings. Let me tell you, even on your worst days, you still have so many reasons to give thanks.

I was talking to someone earlier, that this past week was a horrible week for me. It was just lousy. There were even days when I looked up at God and said, “Really, you want me to write a sermon on thanksgiving? Really, God? Isn’t it a little on the nose, a little ironic?” But you know what? It reminded me to practice what I’m preaching here. And when I stopped and I affirmed these things that are right and good and true, it changed my outlook, my attitude, and it changed my days. We need to make this a part of who we are.

It sounds simple, but it is powerful. It will change our lives. And the best illustration I know of this principle comes from the life of Corrie ten Boom in her autobiography, “The Hiding Place.” (Some of you read that with me a year or so ago when we studied that during the summer; some of you may remember the movie that was made in the 1970s.) Corrie ten Boom and her family lived in the Netherlands, and during World War Two, they and their family were some of the righteous Christians who hid the Jewish people from the Nazis. They were actually betrayed for that. They were actually caught by the Nazis and sent to prison for doing this. Corrie and her beloved sister, Betsie, were actually sent to the Ravensbruck concentration camp in Germany for this “crime,” but there they still tried to continue to practice their faith. They continued to try to worship the Lord and to give thanks for him. They even had a worship service and Bible Studies in their barracks, Barracks Number 28. They had a Bible that they had

managed to hold onto in spite of all the inspections that they'd been through, miraculously. It got to be that the folks that lived in Barracks 28 came to be known among the prisoners as the "crazy barracks where they still have hope." It's the power of the Word of God, even in the middle of a concentration camp.

But one day, Corrie hit her breaking point. One day, she had had enough. She crawled into bed in her barracks – the bed was no more than a wooden platform with filthy, dirty straw thrown on top of it – and as she laid down, she began to feel little pinches on her legs. And she sat up straight immediately, knowing what was going on. The straw that she was laying in was crawling with fleas. Fleas! She turned to her sister, Betsie and said, "Betsie, I can't go on like this. I don't know how to live like this anymore."

And Betsie turned to her and said, "Corrie, remember the scripture we read just this morning, 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians, Chapter 5: "Be joyful, always give thanks in all circumstances. Pray without ceasing." And here are Corrie's own words: "Betsie said, 'That's it, Corrie! That's the answer. We need to give thanks in all circumstances. That's what we can do. We can start right now and thank God for every single thing about these barracks.'" And Corrie writes, "I stared at her, and then I stared around the dark, foul-aired room. 'Such as?' I said. 'Such as being assigned here together.' I bit my lip. 'Oh, yes, Lord Jesus, thank you.' 'Such as what you're holding right there in your hands.' And I look down at the Bible," she writes, "'Well yes, thank you, dear Lord, that there is no inspection when we entered here. Thank you for all the women here in this room who will meet you in these pages.' 'Yes,' said Betsie, 'thank you for the very crowding here, since we're packed in so close, that means many more will hear.' And she looked at me



expectantly. ‘Corrie...,’ she prodded. ‘Oh, alright. Thank you for the jammed, crammed, stuffed, packed, suffocating crowds.’” (You can see she’s having problems here, with this!) “‘Thank you,’ Betsie went on serenely, ‘for the fleas, and for the . . .’ For the fleas?! That was too much. “‘Betsie, there’s no way,’” she said, “‘even God can make me grateful for fleas.’ ‘Give thanks in all circumstances’ she quoted. ‘It doesn’t say in “pleasant circumstances.” Fleas are a part of this place where God has put us.’”

In fact, later on they would learn that the very reason why they could have their worship services and Bible Studies in Barracks 28 was because all the guards at the concentration camp knew that Barracks 28 was crawling with fleas, and they didn’t want to get them, so they stayed away and they didn’t do the inspections and the checks in that barracks that they did in all the others! So God used even the fleas to give Corrie and Betsie the opportunity to praise him, and to teach the prisoners at the concentration camp who he was. And so many women, they write, came to faith before the very end, because he provided the fleas to them, the opportunity to bear witness to him.

What blessings does God want to bring out of the terrible circumstances we are going through right now? I know that may be hard for some of us to hear, and you may not be in a place right now where you can even begin to consider that. You may be so raw and so numb right now that you can’t even go there. But I want to ask a question, something my mom asked of me this past week. She said, “Joshua, what if you woke up tomorrow, and all that you had left were the things that you had given thanks to God for?” And it really made me think. Am I truly a thankful person? Am I truly a person who worships God? What is my attitude? Is thanksgiving and worship a way of life, or do I just do it on special occasions? Is thanksgiving and worship a delight and a joy for me,

and when the fleas come into my life – when the fleas come into *your* life, do we give thanks for them? Do we anticipate how God's going to bring good even out of the tough circumstances? Or do we have the arrogance to grumble before God, to complain before God, to gripe, to whine, to carry on, and in general, to critique our lives, letting God know, "God, you really messed up here." Which is our attitude? What if instead, we made it a point every day to worship, to give thanks, to count our blessings, to thank God even for the troubles and the aches and the pains. What if every day we gave thanks simply because we belong to the Lord, because we are his sheep and he is the Good Shepherd, even in the valley of the shadow of death? For if we want joy, if we want vitality in our lives and in our church, if we want to be a part of God's promised land project here on earth as he makes things on earth as they are in heaven, then we need to cut the complaining and instead, we need to give thanks every day without ceasing. For folks, the Lord is good, and his steadfast love endures forever! Hallelujah! To God alone be the glory!

Let us pray: God, we have so many reasons to give thanks. We have so many reasons to worship you. We pray that in the days and the weeks to come, that you would teach us what it means to truly be thankful, grateful people. Teach us, Lord, to be thankful and to worship. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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## VITA

Rev. Joshua N. Long was born on November 15, 1979 in Wheeling, WV to parents living in Woodsfield, OH. At the age of seven, he moved to Ashtabula, OH, later graduating from Ashtabula High School. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and Christian Thought from Grove City College (Grove City, PA), and a Master of Divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary (Princeton, NJ). He was accepted into the Doctor of Ministry program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in the fall of 2014, and completed residencies at its Charlotte and South Hamilton campuses from 2015-2017. He anticipates that he will graduate from the program in May of 2018.

Rev. Long's first call was as pastor of the Westwood Presbyterian Church in Hamilton, Ohio from 2003-2012. He is currently serving in his second call as the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Harrison, Ohio, where he has served since 2012.